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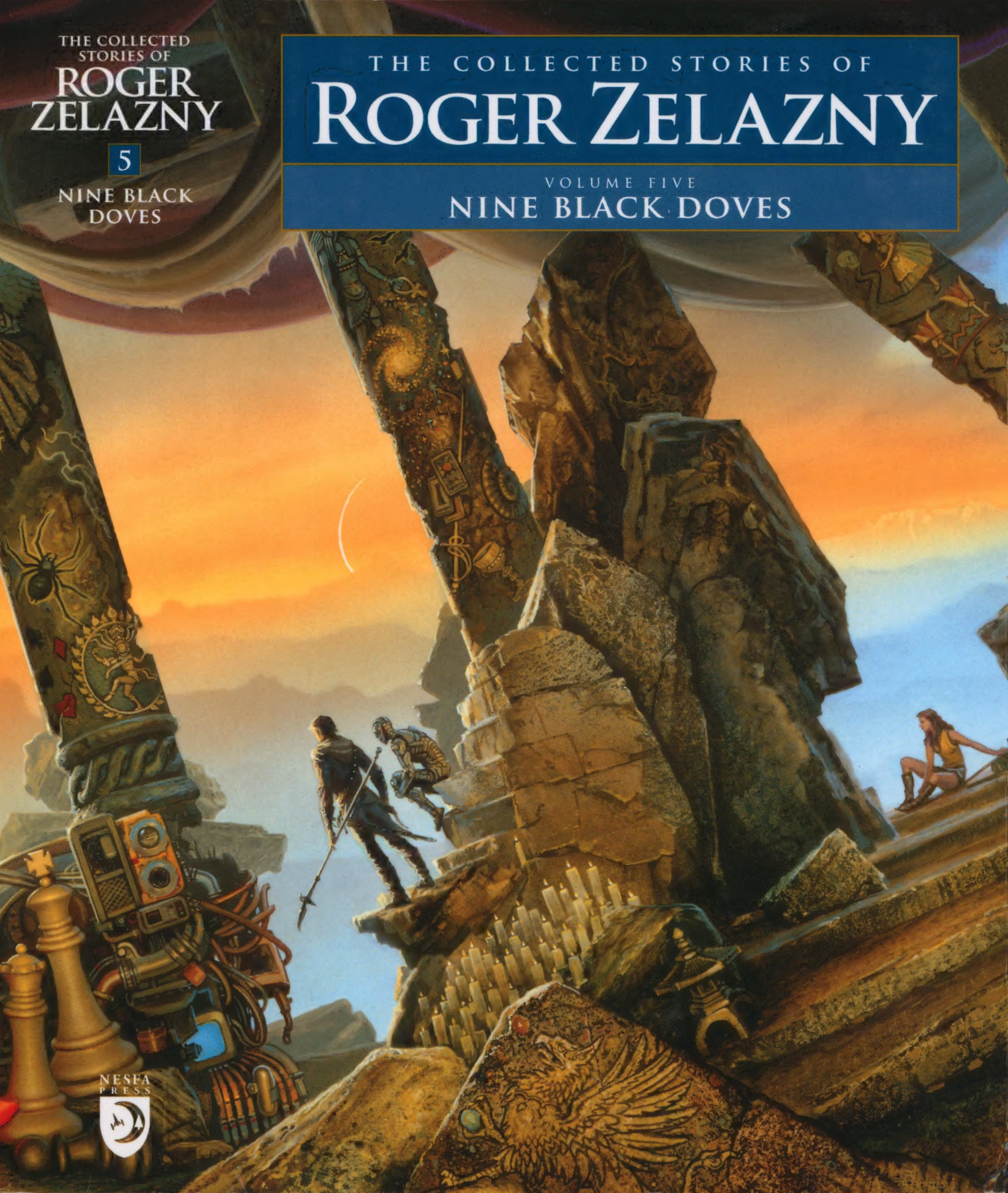

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THE COLLECTED STORIES OF
ROGER ZELAZNY

VOLUME 5: NINE BLACK DOVES

Roger Zelazny wrote with a lyrical quality rarely found in science fiction—creating rousing adventures, intricate "what-if?" stories, clever situations, and sweeping vistas in which to play them out. Leavened with layers of allusion and imagery, his diverse writing styles and breadth of subject matter brought him praise as a prose poet and a Renaissance man. Zelazny's vivid stories, especially his spectacular novellas, are classics in the field.

Although he is best known for his 10-volume Amber series, his early novels *Lord of Light* and *Creatures of Light and Darkness,* and the Dilvish series, his shorter works contain his best writing.

In this six-volume collection you'll find every one of Zelazny's short works, plus a selection of essays, novel excerpts, and other interesting items from his widely varied writing career.

The stories in this series are enriched by Zelazny's own words, taken from his many essays, describing why he wrote the stories and what he thought about them in retrospect. Many of the stories are followed by notes explaining his allusions, turns of phrase, historical references, and unusual word choices.

Here in volume 5, Zelazny continues to amuse us with stories such as "LOKI 7281," "Night Kings," "Quest's End," and two forays into other universes in "Itself Surprised" and "Mana from Heaven."

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NESFA Press
Post Office Box 809
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THE COLLECTED
STORIES OF
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ZELAZNY

5

NINE BLACK
DOVES

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THE COLLECTED STORIES OF ROGER ZELAZNY

VOLUME 1: Threshold

VOLUME 2: Power & Light

VOLUME 3: This Mortal Mountain

VOLUME 4: Last Exit to Babylon

VOLUME 5: Nine Black Doves

VOLUME 6: The Road to Amber

BIBLIOGRAPHY: The Ides of Octember

NINE BLACK DOVES

VOLUME 5:

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF

ROGER ZELAZNY

EDITED BY
David G. Grubbs
Christopher S. Kovacs
Ann Crimmins

NESFA
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Post Office Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701
www.nesfa.org/press
2009

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SECOND EDITION, December 2015

ISBN-10: 1-886778-80-9
ISBN-13: 978-1-886778-80-1

A WORD FROM THE EDITORS

This six volume collection includes all of Zelazny's known short fiction and poetry, three excerpts of important novels, a selection of non-fiction essays, and a few curiosities.

Many of the stories and poems are followed by "A Word from Zelazny" in which the author muses about the preceding work. Many of the works are also followed by a set of "Notes"[1] explaining names, literary allusions and less familiar words. Though you will certainly enjoy Zelazny's work without the notes, they may provide even a knowledgeable reader with some insight into the levels of meaning in Zelazny's writing.

> "My intent has long been to write stories that can be read in many ways from the simple to the complex. I feel that they must be enjoyable simply as stories…even for one who can't catch any of the allusions."
>
> —Roger Zelazny in *Roger Zelazny* by Jane M. Lindskold

The small print under each title displays original publication information (date and source) for published pieces and (sometimes a guess at) the date it was written for unpublished pieces. The small print may also contain a co-author's name, alternate titles for the work, and awards it received. Stories considered part of a series are noted by a § and a series or character name.

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[1] The notes are a work in progress. Please let us know of any overlooked references or allusions, or definitions you may disagree with, for a possible future revision.

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NINE BLACK DOVES

VOLUME 5:

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF

ROGER ZELAZNY

CONSIDERING COWS

by Melinda Snodgrass

Roger entered my life five times. Like so many others, my first introduction to Roger was through his work. I read *Lord of Light* in utter amazement, laughed out loud at parts of *...And Call Me Conrad*, and couldn't wait to get my hands on the next Amber book. Who would become king of Amber? I was always pulling for Random because he was my favorite prince, and Roger must have read my mind.

As I prepared to write this introduction, I went back and looked at his work, and I realized he would have been one hell of a screenwriter. Just consider the opening of *Nine Princes in Amber*. A man awakens in a hospital, realizes he's being kept sedated, and he doesn't know who he is. What summer blockbuster wouldn't kill for such a hook?

I'm also struck by the length of his books. Today we tend toward large, some would say bloated, novels. Roger wrote with an economy of style that was elegance incarnate. He let what *wasn't* said tell as much of the story as what was written on the page. He was a master.

The first time I actually met Roger the man, and not as a troubadour spinning his tales of whimsy, melancholy, and wonder, was at one of George R. R. Martin's summer barbecues. George led me up to this spare man with deep set eyes and equally deep smile lines beside his mouth and said, "Have you met Roger Zelazny?"

I stammered out something, then stumbled my way through the "Oh God, I love your books" remark that always sounds moronic and shallow because it can't begin to encompass what you felt when you read the pages in *Sign of the Unicorn* where Corwin walks up the moonlight staircase of Tir-na Nog'th, the dream castle that floats in the night sky above Amber. I realized how totally stupid I sounded, and I fled before I could humiliate myself further. I'm sure my embarrassment was equally matched by Roger's because what always struck people about Roger was his humility.

But don't be fooled. Roger knew his worth, and he knew what he created was unique. And he understood the business of writing. Which brings me to encounter number three. I was a baby beginning writer who had just sold her first book. We were all attending our local science fiction convention, Bubonicon, and my then agent had come out to New Mexico because she represented four of us in the Albuquerque area. A group of us went out to dinner at a local Indonesian restaurant, and I ended up seated next to Roger.

This agent started browbeating me about how I had to change my name because I had such a stupid, ugly name, and suddenly this magnificent baritone voice rang out. "That's just crap!" Roger said. The agent subsided in shock, and Roger continued. "She has a unique and unusual name. If someone reads a book by her and likes it, they will never forget that name. I should know. My name's Zelazny, for Christ's sake. You leave her alone." As you can see, Roger's fierce support acted like a dose of tonic. I kept my name.

Our fourth interaction was working on the shared world anthology *Wild Cards*. Roger brought us Croyd Crenson, aka The Sleeper, the most versatile, interesting, and human character among all that wild cast of characters. In the spec Wild Cards script I wrote I used Croyd as the viewpoint character. That script is still generating meetings in Hollywood, and inevitably the producers who are familiar with Wild Cards bring up Croyd as one of their favorite characters. George and I made the decision that Croyd would not age. That if we couldn't have Roger, at least we would have his creation walking the streets of Jokertown, eating enormous meals at local diners, discovering his new power, helping his fellow citizens, fearing to sleep, and taking more and more speed until at last he's overcome, sleeps, and wakes to a new power and new adventures.

I have two stories from those Wild Cards days. The first involves Howard Waldrop, days of the week, and the first and only time I ever saw Roger show temper. For Roger's story to work, Wild Card Day had to fall on a weekday because Croyd is a fourteen-year-old boy walking home from school. Howard wrote the first Wild Cards story and set Wild Card Day on his birthday, September 15, 1946. Howard assured Roger that September 15, 1946, was a weekday. I think Howard told Roger it was a Tuesday.

So we were gathered at George's house, and Roger, nursing his pipe, was curled up on this big, round ottoman like a lanky cat. Book One had been published, and someone pointed out that September 15, 1946, was actually a Sunday. Roger absorbed this, then took his pipe out of his mouth and flung it into the fireplace while bellowing "Damn, damn, damn!"

Wild Cards gave me the opportunity to actually work creatively with Roger. A few years later we were working on Book Five. In this book Croyd's new power was to infect and re-infect people with the Wild Card virus, and since the virus is 90% fatal, this made Croyd very dangerous. In my story Croyd is deep in amphetamine fueled paranoia. My doctor character had Croyd at the clinic and had to keep him locked up, but Roger had given Croyd enormous strength.

Once again we were at George's house, and we were trying to brainstorm a fix for this conundrum. Everyone was throwing out ideas while Roger sat quietly listening. Then he said, "Consider cows."

That stopped the conversation and we all looked at him. He went on to explain that cows are so stupid that they can be fooled by just painting lines on the road to resemble cattle guards. You didn't have to actually build a cattle guard. Roger suggested that Croyd was suggestible in his hyped up state. If they just painted bars on the glass of the isolation room, he would assume he was trapped. It was quirky, funny, and perfect. I immediately used it in the story.

Wild Cards went on hiatus, and Roger drifted out of my life again. I saw him sporadically at barbecues and conventions. Then he met Jane, and he became an integral part of our social group and gaming group. Many, many nights Roger and Jane would drive down to Bernalillo to have dinner with my husband and me, or Carl and I would drive up to Santa Fe to spend time with Roger and Jane. Roger hadn't been around horses much, and one summer evening they had driven down for another long evening of good food and conversation. As they passed the barn, they saw my horses all wearing their fly masks. Roger was charmed by this and kept talking about how the horses were going to a masquerade and were incognito.

We knew Roger had been ill, but like everyone I thought it was just an infection. Then one night while Carl and Jane went out to the barn to feed the horses, Roger confided in me. He told me he had colon cancer, but he was determined to beat it. He asked me not to tell anyone because only a handful of people knew. I told him I was honored by his confidence but wondered why he was breaking his silence with me. He told me he wanted someone to talk to who understood what it was like to live with a chronic disease. (I have Crohn's.) I told him I would keep his secret, and he could talk to me anytime he wanted. I kept that promise though it was hard and more so when his sudden death came as such a shock to the many people who had known and loved Roger.

That year spent socializing and gaming with Roger is one of the most special in my life. Walter Jon Williams[1] wrote so movingly about our gaming experiences so I won't repeat what he's said. Instead I'll tell you of Roger's incredible generosity. At one of our dinners my Crohn's was acting up, and I was in pain. Roger wanted to share with me a tincture made by soaking a certain kind of mushroom in water. In addition to western medical treatments Roger was also using herbal remedies. This particular mushroom had to be ordered, and it sounded like it wasn't all that common, but Roger insisted that I take part of one so I could make the tincture for myself. He said it would help with my nausea and pain, and it did.

And now as I look back, I realize that every one of my interactions with Roger involved him making gifts to me—of his genius in his books, defending my right to be me, helping me be a better writer, and finally sharing his medicine. There will never be another Roger Zelazny, and we're all the poorer for it.

—Melinda Snodgrass

---

[1] See "A Singular Being" by Walter Jon Williams in volume 2.

THE TWO ROGERS

by George R. R. Martin

I was twice as fortunate as most. I knew two Roger Zelaznys. One was the writer. The other was my friend.

I met the writer first. It was 1967, and I was a college student, back home for the summer between my freshman and sophomore years at Northwestern. Though I had been reading science fiction voraciously for several years, the genre magazines seldom made it to the candy stores and spinner racks of Bayonne, New Jersey, where I bought my comics and Ace Doubles (Two Complete Novels for 35 cents, couldn't beat that), so I had missed all of the early short stories that launched Roger's career. The only hardcover books I could afford were those offered by the Science Fiction Book Club.

And then one day the club newsletter *Things To Come* turned up in my mailbox, and one of the offerings was a novel called *Lord of Light* by a writer whom I'd not heard of previously, though it claimed that he had already won both the Hugo and the Nebula. It was there in *Things To Come* that I first read those fateful words, "His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god."

I bought the book, of course. I wanted to hear more about this fellow Sam and check out this new (to me, at least) writer.

I had read Heinlein, Asimov, Vance, Bester, de Camp, Van Vogt, Andre Norton, Eric Frank Russell, Fritz Leiber, H. P. Lovecraft, Jack Williamson, Pohl & Kornbluth, all the classics. I fancied that I knew my science fiction, had even begun to write some of my own…but nothing that I had read previously prepared me for *Lord of Light*.

This was not like anything that had gone before. The poetry of the language. The way the author played with myth. The colorful background, the inventive world building, the non-linear structure. And of course the characters. Sam especially, who never claimed to be a god. By the time I closed the final page, Roger Zelazny had become one of my favorite writers. Not one of my favorite science fiction writers. One of my favorite *writers.*

Lord of Light was an awakening. For me and for the field. It won the Hugo Award and was nominated for the Nebula Award for the year of its publication, and if it were up to me, it would have won the Pulitzer as well. *Lord of Light* is one of those books that you need to reread every few years. Each time you do, you will discover something new. It has been almost half a century since I first encountered it, but age has not withered its power nor custom staled its countless charms. Now, as then, I would rank it as one of the five best science fiction novels ever written. If you have never read it, do not call yourself a science fiction fan.

In the years that followed *Lord of Light,* I sought out everything by Zelazny that I could get my hands on. *This Immortal, Creatures of Light and Darkness, Isle of the Dead, Jack of Shadows, Roadmarks, Doorways in the Sand, The Dream Master* ("He Who Shapes"), and the rest. Each of them is unique, and each of them is wonderful in its own unique way. (Yes, even *Damnation Alley.*) Zelazny never repeated himself, and he never disappointed.

And then there came *Nine Princes of Amber* and the rest of Corwin's saga; not sequels, truly, but rather a continuation of one long, epic story. With Corwin of Amber and his troublesome siblings, Zelazny gave us all a cast of characters as fascinating, complex, and charismatic as any the genre had seen since…well, since Francis Sandow, Render, and Sam. Amber and Chaos and their infinite shadow worlds were something we had not seen before, either, a unique fantasy setting worthy of being ranked with Tolkien's Middle Earth, Howard's Hyborian Age, and Vance's Dying Earth. The tale itself, with its cliffhangers, reversals, twists, and maddeningly complex spiderweb of plots and counterplots and layered revelations, was truly virtuoso. And of course the writing itself was pure Zelazny, full of poetry and wit and action, a song in prose with moments that will linger long in the memory of anyone fortunate enough to encounter them.

Zelazny's short fiction was just as extraordinary. Early in his career, he wrote "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," the last of the great "old Mars" stories, written just as NASA's probes were about to prove that the real Mars was something very different and far less interesting. An instant classic, it was soon enshrined by the Science Fiction Writers of America in their *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*. Then, as a bookend, he went out and wrote the last "old Venus" story too, and called that one, "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth."

In those days, the typical career pattern for a new writer was to make a name writing short fiction for the magazines, win a few awards, and then switch to novels, where the money was…but Zelazny never abandoned the short story. As this splendid set of books from NESFA Press bears witness, his shorter work only grew stronger over the decades, with brilliant tales like "The Keys to December," "The Last Defender of Camelot," "Home Is the Hangman," "Permafrost," "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai," and so very many more.

The author of all those stories, the first Roger Zelazny that I came to know, was a writer of surpassing brilliance, one of the true giants of our genre…but like Heinlein and Vance and F. Scott Fitzgerald and many other authors I admired, he was someone I knew only through his work. I had no inkling then that Roger would one day become a dear, close friend.

As best I can recall, the first time I ever met Roger Zelazny in person was at Discon, the World Science Fiction Convention in Washington, D.C., in 1974, where Roger was the Guest of Honor. He was only 37 at the time, very young to be a Worldcon GoH, an accolade that is usually bestowed on distinguished gray-bearded gentlemen (and gentlewomen, though their beards tend to be shorter) toward the end of their long careers…but so profound had been Roger's impact on the field that only the most hidebound old phans ever questioned the propriety of honoring this *wunderkind* at such a tender age.

Our first meeting was hardly the stuff of legend. I had sold a few stories myself by that point and was up for my very first Hugo at that very convention (I lost), but I was still in awe of Roger, so when I found myself in his presence, the best that I could do was shuffle my feet, stare at his shoes, and mutter something about how I really really *really* liked his stuff. He was appropriately gracious and thanked me between puffs of his pipe, and that was pretty much the end of it.

In the years to come I encountered him at other conventions, but it was not until the spring of 1976 that I spent any extended period of time with him. That year Roger had been hired to teach a workshop for aspiring writers in Bloomington, Indiana. By that time I had published quite a few more stories and even won a Hugo of my own, so the good folks running the workshop had offered me the gig as Roger's assistant. I accepted with alacrity, as much for the chance to learn at the master's feet as for the modest stipend.

There in Bloomington we spent the better part of a couple of weeks together, reading and critiquing stories, working with the students, talking books and sharing meals. The Indiana workshop did not follow the famous Clarion model, where all the students read and critique one another's stories. Instead the workshoppers heard a series of lectures by Roger and received their critiques from him and me. Truth be told, I think I learned as much from Roger's talks as any of the students.

"Where do get your ideas?" is the eternal question that every writer dreads, generally because we have no answer for it. Some will say "the muse," some may say "Schenectady," some just say "That's a stupid question," but the truth is most of us have no idea where we get our ideas. Roger did, though. "From the Yellow Pages," he would say. I saw him demonstrate the process at that Bloomington workshop. He had the students open the Yellow Pages at random, close their eyes, point...and write a story about whatever listing their fingers came to rest on. That was where "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" had come from, he told them. He opened a phone book at random, closed his eyes, pointed...and hit "Bait Shops." (Or so he said. But then again, he was also known to say that he wrote *Lord of Light* entirely for the pun, perhaps the greatest groaner in all of literature. Not everything he said could be trusted. There was a playful side to Roger that strangers seldom saw, a twinkle in his eye that meant mischief.)

As for the critiques, the two of us slipped naturally into good cop / bad cop roles. I was the bad cop who tore apart the stories and left them bleeding on the ground. Roger was the good cop who put them back together. He was as good a teacher as he was a writer; gentle, soft-spoken, and supportive, capable of finding something good in even the most wretched manuscript, always ready with constructive suggestions and improvements. His story sense was as sharp as his prose.

Those weeks in Bloomington deepened my admiration of Roger the writer, but they also gave me my first glimpses of the person behind the prose. Those who knew him in his youth have often told me how shy he was as a boy and a young man, and some of that shyness still remained even in 1976 and could make him seem reserved and cool. Once you got to know him, though, Roger was one of the warmest people I have ever met, a wonderful conversationalist with a rare, dry wit. He was truly a Renaissance man; an aikido master (and later teacher), a collector of Persian carpets, Navajo rugs, rare first editions, and rarer comic books (he owned a near-mint copy of *Marvel Comics #1*, the comic that introduced the original Golden Age versions of Submariner and the Human Torch), a lover of good food, good drink, and aromatic tobaccos who could discuss classic literature one moment and recite Green Lantern's oath the next.

In the years that followed, Roger and I continued to bump into one another on the con circuit, but after Bloomington our relationship was closer, and we often found time to have a meal together. Then, in December of 1979, I left a home and job in Iowa and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to take a stab at being a full-time writer. I also left behind my troubled four-year-old marriage, which finally collapsed during the move itself, leaving me to move to New Mexico by myself. Though I had some friends down in Albuquerque, an hour away, I knew no one at all in Santa Fe itself...except for Roger Zelazny. My first year in New Mexico was a lonely one, a year I spent largely by myself, bent over my typewriter in the back room of my little house on Declovina street, working on the book that would ultimately become my novel *Fevre Dream* and hoping I could finish it before my dwindling funds gave out. It might have been a truly unbearable year if not for Roger. Though our previous acquaintance had been relatively slight and entirely professional, Roger and his wife Judy took me under their wings, asking me to their home for dinners, drinks, and conversations, introducing me to their friends and to many of the local writers, inviting me to parties, wine tastings, book signings, literary luncheons.

Meals with Roger became a regular and important part of my life in Santa Fe. Breakfast burritos and blue corn pancakes at the Tecolote Cafe, where Roger's favorite was the Sheepherder's Breakfast, a blend of potatoes, onions, chile, cheese, and jalapeno peppers with a poached egg on top, the hottest thing on the menu. Lunches at the Shed, where Roger always made certain to order the lemon souffle as soon as we sat down, since it had a lamentable tendency to sell out early (still does). A memorable dinner at Chez Renée Captain's Table (long since vanished, though its empty building still stands decaying on Cerrillos Road), where we celebrated the sale of my novel *Fevre Dream*. Countless dinners at the Palace (another landmark Santa Fe restaurant, now gone), a former brothel, where the dessert cart was a wonder to behold. Roger loved desserts and would often eat two or three of them, confusing waiters no end. "I'll take the apple pie," he would say. "Very good, sir," the waiter would say. "Yes, and that German chocolate cake looks good." The waiter would frown. "In place of the apple pie, sir?" he would say. "No, I'll have both of them. Oh, and the zabaglione as well. What flavors of ice cream do you have?" (And yet he never gained an ounce and remained rail thin all his life.)

One day we were driving down to Albuquerque to attend the monthly First Friday writers' luncheon and talking shop along the way, as we often did. Our mutual friend, Fred Saberhagen, had just sold an anthology of science fiction and fantasy stories about chess (eventually published as *Pawn to Infinity*) and had asked both of us for stories. My own pals Gardner Dozois and Jack Dann were putting together a theme anthology as well, about unicorns (eventually published as *Unicorns!*), and George Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer had written Roger to sound him out about contributing to their anthology of stories set in bars and taverns, *Tales from the Spaceport Bar*.

"The thing to do," I said, "is write a story about a guy who plays chess with a unicorn in a bar, and sell it to all three anthologies." Roger chortled at my joke…

…and then he went home and did it. The guy who plays chess with the unicorn in the bar he named "Martin." He did indeed sell the story to all three anthologies, and to *Asimov's* as well. "Unicorn Variation" went on to win the Hugo Award, beating one of my own novelettes in the process.

That was the sort of literary challenge Roger loved. He was a writer who took his art seriously, but he never lost his sense of play. The huge, page-long sentence in *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, that infamous pun in *Lord of Light*, the inventive structure of *Doorways in the Sand*, those were all glimpses of his playful side. So too his contributions to Wild Cards, the series of shared world superhero anthologies that I edited, starting around 1984. Knowing Roger's love of comic books, I knew he would give us something wonderful, and so he did. The character that he created—Croyd Crenson, the Sleeper—became in many ways the essence of Wild Cards, both hero and villain, always the same and always changing, a character who could be adjusted to fit almost any role a writer needed him for. Roger designed him that way quite deliberately, and he always got a kick out of seeing what other writers did with Croyd. The Wild Cards series is still going today, twenty years and twenty-one volumes after it began, and the Sleeper is still a part of it…and will continue to be for as long as the series continues. In Croyd, we like to think, a little bit of Roger still lives on.

As I write this, I realize that it has been fourteen years since Roger died, since that dark night that I drove him to St. Vincent's Hospital for what would prove to be his final stay. It doesn't seem possible. His face and voice still linger in my memory, so vividly that one would think it had only been a week since I last saw him.

I knew two Rogers, and I miss both of them. I miss the writer that I first encountered in 1967 and the tales he would have told us if he only lingered here among us longer. And I miss the friend I made in 1976 at that workshop in Indiana.

He left us too soon, and we shall not see his like again.

—George R. R. Martin
Santa Fe, New Mexico
August, 2009

STORIES

PERMAFROST

Omni, April 1986.
Hugo Award 1987 (novelette), Nebula nominee 1987 (novelette),
#5 on 1987 Locus poll (novelette).

High upon the western slope of Mount Kilimanjaro is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. An author is always necessary to explain what it was doing there because stiff leopards don't talk much.

THE MAN. The music seems to come and go with a will of its own. At least turning the knob on the bedside unit has no effect on its presence or absence. A half-familiar, alien tune, troubling in a way. The phone rings, and he answers it. There is no one there. Again.

Four times during the past half hour, while grooming himself, dressing and rehearsing his arguments, he has received noncalls. When he checked with the desk he was told there were no calls. But that damned clerk-thing had to be malfunctioning—like everything else in this place.

The wind, already heavy, rises, hurling particles of ice against the building with a sound like multitudes of tiny claws scratching. The whining of steel shutters sliding into place startles him. But worst of all, in his reflex glance at the nearest window, it seems he has seen a face.

Impossible of course. This is the third floor. A trick of light upon hard-driven flakes: Nerves.

Yes. He has been nervous since their arrival this morning. Before then, even…

He pushes past Dorothy's stuff upon the countertop, locates a small package among his own articles. He unwraps a flat red rectangle about the size of his thumbnail. He rolls up his sleeve and slaps the patch against the inside of his left elbow.

The tranquilizer discharges immediately into his bloodstream. He takes several deep breaths, then peels off the patch and drops it into the disposal unit. He rolls his sleeve down, reaches for his jacket.

The music rises in volume, as if competing with the blast of the wind, the rattle of the icy flakes. Across the room the videoscreen comes on of its own accord.

The face. The same face. Just for an instant. He is certain. And then channelless static, wavy lines. Snow. He chuckles.

All right, play it that way, nerves, he thinks. *You've every reason. But the trank's coming to get you now. Better have your fun quick. You're about to be shut down.*

The videoscreen cuts into a porn show.

Smiling, the woman mounts the man…

The picture switches to a voiceless commentator on something or other.

He will survive. He is a survivor. He, Paul Plaige, has done risky things before and has always made it through. It is just that having Dorothy along creates a kind of *déjà vu* that he finds unsettling. No matter.

She is waiting for him in the bar. Let her wait. A few drinks will make her easier to persuade—unless they make her bitchy. That sometimes happens, too. Either way, he has to talk her out of the thing.

Silence. The wind stops. The scratching ceases. The music is gone.

The whirring. The window screens dilate upon the empty city.

Silence, under totally overcast skies. Mountains of ice ringing the place. Nothing moving. Even the video has gone dead.

He recoils at the sudden flash from a peripheral unit far to his left across the city. The laser beam hits a key point on the glacier, and its face falls away.

Moments later he hears the hollow, booming sound of the crashing ice. A powdery storm has risen like surf at the ice mount's foot. He smiles at the power, the timing, the display. Andrew Aldon…always on the job, dueling with the elements, stalemating nature herself, immortal guardian of Playpoint. At least Aldon never malfunctions.

The silence comes again. As he watches the risen snows settle he feels the tranquilizer beginning to work. It will be good not to have to worry about money again. The past two years have taken a lot out of him. Seeing all of his investments fail in the Big Washout—that was when his nerves had first begun to act up. He has grown softer than he was a century ago—a young, rawboned soldier of fortune then, out to make his bundle and enjoy it. And he had. Now he has to do it again, though this time will be easier—except for Dorothy.

He thinks of her. A century younger than himself, still in her twenties, sometimes reckless, used to all of the good things in life. There is something vulnerable about Dorothy, times when she lapses into such a strong dependence that he feels oddly moved. Other times, it just irritates the hell out of him. Perhaps this is the closest he can come to love now, an occasional ambivalent response to being needed. But of course she is loaded. That breeds a certain measure of necessary courtesy. Until he can make his own bundle again, anyway. But none of these things are the reason he has to keep her from accompanying him on his journey. It goes beyond love or money. It is survival.

The laser flashes again, this time to the right. He waits for the crash.

THE STATUE. It is not a pretty pose. She lies frosted in an ice cave, looking like one of Rodin's less comfortable figures, partly propped on her left side, right elbow raised above her head, hand hanging near her face, shoulders against the wall, left leg completely buried.

She has on a gray parka, the hood slipped back to reveal twisted strands of dark blond hair; and she wears blue trousers; there is a black boot on the one foot that is visible.

She is coated with ice, and within the much-refracted light of the cave what can be seen of her features is not unpleasant but not strikingly attractive either. She looks to be in her twenties.

There are a number of fracture lines within the cave's walls and floor. Overhead, countless icicles hang like stalactites, sparkling jewel-like in the much-bounced light. The grotto has a stepped slope to it with the statue at its higher end, giving to the place a vaguely shrine-like appearance.

On those occasions when the cloud cover is broken at sundown, a reddish light is cast about her figure.

She has actually moved in the course of a century—a few inches, from a general shifting of the ice. Tricks of the light make her seem to move more frequently, however.

The entire tableau might give the impression that this is merely a pathetic woman who had been trapped and frozen to death here, rather than the statue of the living goddess in the place where it all began.

THE WOMAN. She sits in the bar beside a window. The patio outside is gray and angular and drifted with snow; the flowerbeds are filled with dead plants—stiff, flattened, and frozen. She does not mind the view. Far from it. Winter is a season of death and cold, and she likes being reminded of it. She enjoys the prospect of pitting herself against its frigid and very visible fangs. A faint flash of light passes over the patio, followed by a distant roaring sound. She sips her drink and licks her lips and listens to the soft music that fills the air.

She is alone. The bartender and all of the other help here are of the mechanical variety. If anyone other than Paul were to walk in, she would probably scream. They are the only people in the hotel during this long off-season. Except for the sleepers, they are the only people in all of Playpoint.

And Paul… He will be along soon to take her to the dining room. There they can summon holo-ghosts to people the other tables if they wish. She does not wish. She likes being alone with Paul at a time like this, on the eve of a great adventure.

He will tell her his plans over coffee, and perhaps even this afternoon they might obtain the necessary equipment to begin the exploration for that which would put him on his feet again financially, return to him his self-respect. It will of course be dangerous and very rewarding. She finishes her drink, rises, and crosses to the bar for another.

And Paul… She had really caught a falling star, a swashbuckler on the way down, a man with a glamorous past just balanced on the brink of ruin. The teetering had already begun when they had met two years before, which had made it even more exciting. Of course, he needed a woman like her to lean upon at such a time. It wasn't just her money. She could never believe the things her late parents had said about him. No, he does care for her. He is strangely vulnerable and dependent.

She wants to turn him back into the man he once must have been, and then of course that man will need her, too. The thing he had been—that is what she needs most of all—a man who can reach up and bat the moon away. He must have been like that long ago.

She tastes her second drink.

The son of a bitch had better hurry, though. She is getting hungry.

THE CITY. Playpoint is located on the world known as Balfrost, atop a high peninsula that slopes down to a now-frozen sea. Playpoint contains all of the facilities for an adult playground, and it is one of the more popular resorts in this sector of the galaxy from late spring through early autumn—approximately fifty Earth years. Then winter comes on like a period of glaciation, and everybody goes away for half a century—or half a year, depending on how one regards such matters. During this time Playpoint is given into the care of its automated defense and maintenance routine. This is a self-repairing system, directed toward cleaning, plowing, thawing, melting, warming everything in need of such care, as well as directly combating the encroaching ice and snow. And all of these functions are done under the supervision of a well-protected central computer that also studies the weather and climate patterns, anticipating as well as reacting.

This system has worked successfully for many centuries, delivering Playpoint over to spring and pleasure in reasonably good condition at the end of each long winter.

There are mountains behind Playpoint, water (or ice, depending on the season) on three sides, weather and navigation satellites high above. In a bunker beneath the administration building is a pair of sleepers—generally a man and a woman—who awaken once every year or so to physically inspect the maintenance system's operations and to deal with any special situations that might have arisen. An alarm may arouse them for emergencies at any time. They are well paid, and over the years they have proven worth the investment. The central computer has at its disposal explosives and lasers as well as a great variety of robots. Usually it keeps a little ahead of the game, and it seldom falls behind for long.

At the moment, things are about even because the weather has been particularly nasty recently.

Zzzzt! Another block of ice has become a puddle.

Zzzzt! The puddle has been evaporated. The molecules climb toward a place where they can get together and return as snow.

The glaciers shuffle their feet, edge forward. *Zzzzt!* Their gain has become a loss.

Andrew Aldon knows exactly what he is doing.

CONVERSATIONS. The waiter, needing lubrication, rolls off after having served them, passing through a pair of swinging doors.

She giggles. "Wobbly," she says.

"Old World charm," he agrees, trying and failing to catch her eye as he smiles.

"You have everything worked out?" she asks after they have begun eating.

"Sort of," he says, smiling again.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Both. I need more information. I want to go and check things over first. Then I can figure the best course of action."

"I note your use of the singular pronoun," she says steadily, meeting his gaze at last.

His smile freezes and fades.

"I was referring to only a little preliminary scouting," he says softly.

"No," she says. "We. Even for a little preliminary scouting."

He sighs and sets down his fork.

"This will have very little to do with anything to come later," he begins. "Things have changed a lot. I'll have to locate a new route. This will just be dull work and no fun."

"I didn't come along for fun," she replies. "We were going to share everything, remember? That includes boredom, danger, and anything else. That was the understanding when I agreed to pay our way."

"I'd a feeling it would come to that," he says, after a moment.

"Come to it? It's always been there. That was our agreement."

He raises his goblet and sips the wine.

"Of course. I'm not trying to rewrite history. It's just that things would go faster if I could do some of the initial looking around myself. I can move more quickly alone."

"What's the hurry?" she says. "A few days this way or that. I'm in pretty good shape. I won't slow you down that much."

"I'd the impression you didn't particularly like it here. I just wanted to hurry things up so we could get the hell out."

"That's very considerate," she says, beginning to eat again. "But that's my problem, isn't it?" She looks up at him. "Unless there's some other reason you don't want me along?"

He drops his gaze quickly, picks up his fork. "Don't be silly."

She smiles. "Then that's settled. I'll go with you this afternoon to look for the trail."

The music stops, to be succeeded by a sound as of the clearing of a throat. Then, "Excuse me for what may seem like eavesdropping," comes a deep, masculine voice. "It is actually only a part of a simple monitoring function I keep in effect—"

"Aldon!" Paul exclaims.

"At your service, Mr. Plaige, more or less. I choose to make my presence known only because I did indeed overhear you, and the matter of your safety overrides the good manners that would otherwise dictate reticence. I've been receiving reports that indicate we could be hit by some extremely bad weather this afternoon. So if you were planning an extended sojourn outside, I would recommend you postpone it."

"Oh," Dorothy says.

"Thanks," Paul says.

"I shall now absent myself. Enjoy your meal and your stay."

The music returns.

"Aldon?" Paul asks.

There is no reply.

"Looks as if we do it tomorrow or later."

"Yes," Paul agrees, and he is smiling his first relaxed smile of the day. And thinking fast.

THE WORLD. Life on Balfrost proceeds in peculiar cycles. There are great migrations of animal life and quasianimal life to the equatorial regions during the long winter. Life in the depths of the seas goes on. And the permafrost vibrates with its own style of life.

The permafrost. Throughout the winter and on through the spring the permafrost lives at its peak. It is laced with mycelia—twining, probing, touching, knotting themselves into ganglia, reaching out to infiltrate other systems. It girds the globe, vibrating like a collective unconscious throughout the winter. In the spring it sends up stalks which develop gray, flowerlike appendages for a few days. These blooms then collapse to reveal dark pods which subsequently burst with small, popping sounds, releasing clouds of sparkling spores that the winds bear just about everywhere. These are extremely hardy, like the mycelia they will one day become.

The heat of summer finally works its way down into the permafrost, and the strands doze their way into a long period of quiescence. When the cold returns, they are roused, spores send forth new filaments that repair old damages, create new synapses. A current begins to flow. The life of summer is like a fading dream. For eons this had been the way of things upon Balfrost, within Balfrost. Then the goddess decreed otherwise. Winter's queen spread her hands, and there came a change.

THE SLEEPERS. Paul makes his way through swirling flakes to the administration building. It has been a simpler matter than he had anticipated, persuading Dorothy to use the sleep-induction unit to be well rested for the morrow. He had pretended to use the other unit himself, resisting its blandishments until he was certain she was asleep and he could slip off undetected.

He lets himself into the vaultlike building, takes all of the old familiar turns, makes his way down a low ramp. The room is unlocked and a bit chilly, but he begins to perspire when he enters. The two cold lockers are in operation. He checks their monitoring systems and sees that everything is in order.

All right, go! Borrow the equipment now. They won't be using it.

He hesitates.

He draws nearer and looks down through the view plates at the faces of the sleepers. No resemblance, thank God. He realizes then that he is trembling. He backs away, turns, and flees toward the storage area.

Later, in a yellow snowslider, carrying special equipment, he heads inland.

As he drives, the snow ceases falling and the winds die down. He smiles. The snows sparkle before him, and landmarks do not seem all that unfamiliar. Good omens, at last.

Then something crosses his path, turns, halts, and faces him.

ANDREW ALDON. Andrew Aldon, once a man of considerable integrity and resource, had on his deathbed opted for continued existence as a computer program, the enchanted loom of his mind shuttling and weaving thereafter as central processing's judgmental program in the great guardian computerplex at Playpoint. And there he functions as a program of considerable integrity and resource. He maintains the city, and he fights the elements. He does not merely respond to pressure, but he anticipates structural and functional needs; he generally outguesses the weather. Like the professional soldier he once had been, he keeps himself in a state of constant alert—not really difficult considering the resources available to him. He is seldom wrong, always competent, and sometimes brilliant. Occasionally he resents his fleshless state. Occasionally he feels lonely.

This afternoon he is puzzled by the sudden veering off of the storm he had anticipated and by the spell of clement weather that has followed this meterological quirk. His mathematics were elegant, but the weather was not. It seems peculiar that this should come at a time of so many other little irregularities, such as unusual ice adjustments, equipment glitches, and the peculiar behavior of machinery in the one occupied room of the hotel—a room troublesomely tenanted by a *non grata* ghost from the past.

So he watches for a time. He is ready to intervene when Paul enters the administration building and goes to the bunkers. But Paul does nothing that might bring harm to the sleepers. His curiosity is dominant when Paul draws equipment. He continues to watch. This is because in his judgment, Paul bears watching.

Aldon decides to act only when he detects a development that runs counter to anything in his experience. He sends one of his mobile units to intercept Paul as the man heads out of town. It catches up with him at a bending of the way and slides into his path with one appendage upraised.

"Stop!" Aldon calls through the speaker.

Paul brakes his vehicle and sits for a moment regarding the machine.

Then he smiles faintly. "I assume you have good reason for interfering with a guest's freedom of movement."

"Your safety takes precedence."

"I am perfectly safe."

"At the moment."

"What do you mean?"

"This weather pattern has suddenly become more than a little unusual. You seem to occupy a drifting island of calm while a storm rages about you."

"So I'll take advantage of it now and face the consequences later, if need be."

"It is your choice. I wanted it to be an informed one, however."

"All right. You've informed me. Now get out of my way."

"In a moment. You departed under rather unusual circumstances the last time you were here—in breach of your contract."

"Check your legal bank if you've got one. The statute's run for prosecuting me on that."

"There are some things on which there is no statute of limitations."

"What do you mean by that? I turned in a report on what happened that day."

"One which—conveniently—could not be verified. You were arguing that day..."

"We always argued. That's just the way we were. If you have something to say about it, say it."

"No, I have nothing more to say about it. My only intention is to caution you—"

"Okay, I'm cautioned."

"To caution you in more ways than the obvious."

"I don't understand."

"I am not certain that things are the same here now as when you left last winter."

"Everything changes."

"Yes, but that is not what I mean. There is something peculiar about this place now. The past is no longer a good guide for the present. More and more anomalies keep cropping up. Sometimes it feels as if the world is testing me or playing games with me."

"You're getting paranoid, Aldon. You've been in that box too long. Maybe it's time to terminate."

"You son of a bitch, I'm trying to tell you something. I've run a lot of figures on this, and all this shit started shortly after you left. The human part of me still has hunches, and I've a feeling there's a connection. If you know all about this and can cope with it, fine. If you don't, I think you should watch out. Better yet, turn around and go home."

"I can't."

"Even if there is something out there, something that is making it easy for you—for the moment?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I am reminded of the old Gaia hypothesis—Lovelock, twentieth century…"

"Planetary intelligence. I've heard of it. Never met one, though…"

"Are you certain? I sometimes feel I'm confronting one. What if something is out there and it wants you—is leading you on like a will-o'-the-wisp?"

"It would be my problem, not yours."

"I can protect you against it. Go back to Playpoint."

"No thanks. I will survive."

"What of Dorothy?"

"What of her?"

"You would leave her alone when she might need you?"

"Let me worry about that."

"Your last woman didn't fare too well."

"Damn it! Get out of my way, or I'll run you down!"

The robot withdraws from the trail. Through its sensors Aldon watches Paul drive away.

Very well, he decides. *We know where we stand, Paul. And you haven't changed. That makes it easier.*

Aldon further focuses his divided attention. To Dorothy now. Clad in heated garments. Walking. Approaching the building from which she had seen Paul emerge on his vehicle. She had hailed and cursed him, but the winds had carried her words away. She, too, had only feigned sleep. After a suitable time, then, she sought to follow.

Aldon watches her stumble once and wants to reach out to assist her, but there is no mobile unit handy. He routes one toward the area against future accidents.

"Damn him!" she mutters as she passes along the street, ribbons of snow rising and twisting away before her.

"Where are you going, Dorothy?" Aldon asks over a nearby PA speaker.

She halts and turns. "Who—?"

"Andrew Aldon," he replies. "I have been observing your progress."

"Why?" she asks.

"Your safety concerns me."

"That storm you mentioned earlier?"

"Partly."

"I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. What do you mean *partly*?"

"You move in dangerous company."

"Paul? How so?"

"He once took a woman into that same wild area he is heading for now. She did not come back."

"He told me all about that. There was an accident."

"And no witnesses."

"What are you trying to say?"

"It is suspicious. That is all."

She begins moving again, toward the administrative building. Aldon switches to another speaker, within its entrance.

"I accuse him of nothing. If you choose to trust him, fine. But don't trust the weather. It would be best for you to return to the hotel."

"Thanks but no thanks," she says, entering the building.

He follows her as she explores, is aware of her quickening pulse when she halts beside the cold bunkers.

"These are the sleepers?"

"Yes. Paul held such a position once, as did the unfortunate woman."

"I know. Look, I'm going to follow him whether you approve or not. So why not just tell me where those sleds are kept?"

"Very well. I will do even more than that. I will guide you."

"What do you mean?"

"I request a favor—one that will actually benefit you."

"Name it."

"In the equipment locker behind you, you will find a remote-sensor bracelet. It is also a two-way communication link. Wear it. I can be with you then. To assist you. Perhaps even to protect you."

"You can help me to follow him?"

"Yes."

"All right. I can buy that."

She moves to the locker, opens it.

"Here's something that looks like a bracelet, with doodads."

"Yes. Depress the red stud."

She does. His voice now emerges clearly from the unit.

"Put it on, and I'll show you the way."

"Right."

SNOWSCAPE. Sheets and hills of white, tufts of evergreen shrubbery, protruding joints of rock, snowdevils twirled like tops beneath wind's lash…light and shade. Cracking sky. Tracks in sheltered areas, smoothness beyond.

She follows, masked and bundled.

"I've lost him," she mutters, hunched behind the curved windscreen of her yellow, bullet-shaped vehicle.

"Straight ahead, past those two rocks. Stay in the lee of the ridge. I'll tell you when to turn. I've a satellite overhead. If the clouds stay parted—strangely parted…"

"What do you mean?"

"He seems to be enjoying light from the only break in the cloud cover over the entire area."

"Coincidence."

"I wonder."

"What else could it be?"

"It is almost as if something had opened a door for him."

"Mysticism from a computer?"

"I am not a computer."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Aldon. I know that you were once a man…"

"I am still a man."

"Sorry."

"There are many things I would like to know. Your arrival here comes at an unusual time of year. Paul took some prospecting equipment with him…"

"Yes. It's not against the law. In fact, it is one of the vacation features here, isn't it?"

"Yes. There are many interesting minerals about, some of them precious."

"Well, Paul wants some more, and he didn't want a crowd around while he was looking."

"More?"

"Yes, he made a strike here years ago. Yndella crystals."

"I see. Interesting."

"What's in this for you, anyway?"

"Protecting visitors is a part of my job. In your case, I feel particularly protective."

"How so?"

"In my earlier life I was attracted to women of your—specifications. Physical, as well as what I can tell of the rest."

Two-beat pause, then, "You are blushing."

"Compliments do that to me," she says, "and that's a hell of a monitoring system you have. What's it like?"

"Oh, I can tell your body temperature, your pulse rate—"

"No, I mean, what's it like being—what you are?"

Three-beat pause. "Godlike in some ways. Very human in others—almost exaggeratedly so. I feel something of an amplification of everything I was earlier. Perhaps it's a compensation or a clinging to things past. You make me feel nostalgic—among other things. Don't fret. I'm enjoying it."

"I'd like to have met you then."

"Mutual."

"What were you like?"

"Imagine me as you would. I'll come off looking better that way."

She laughs. She adjusts her filters. She thinks about Paul.

"What was *he* like in his earlier days—Paul?" she asks.

"Probably pretty much the way he is now, only less polished."

"In other words, you don't care to say."

The trail turns upward more steeply, curves to the right. She hears winds but does not feel them. Cloud-shadow grayness lies all about, but her trail/*his* trail is lighted.

"I don't really know," Aldon says, after a time, "and I will not guess, in the case of someone you care about."

"Gallant," she observes.

"No, just fair," he replies. "I might be wrong."

They continue to the top of the rise, where Dorothy draws a sharp breath and further darkens her goggles against the sudden blaze where a range of ice fractures rainbows and strews their shards like confetti in all directions.

"God!" she says.

"Or goddess," Aldon replies.

"A goddess, sleeping in a circle of flame?"

"Not sleeping."

"That would be a lady for you, Aldon—if she existed. God and goddess."

"I do not want a goddess."

"I can see his tracks, heading into that."

"Not swerving a bit, as if he knows where he's going."

She follows, tracing slopes like the curves of a pale torso. The world is stillness and light and whiteness. Aldon on her wrist hums softly now, an old tune, whether of love or martial matters she isn't certain. Distances are distorted, perspectives skewed. She finds herself humming softly along with him, heading for the place where Paul's tracks find their vanishing point and enter infinity.

THE LIMP WATCH HUNG UPON THE TREE LIMB. *My lucky day. The weather…trail clean. Things changed but not so out of shape I can't tell where it is. The lights! God, yes! Iceshine, mounds of prisms… If only the opening is still there… Should have brought explosives. There has been shifting, maybe a collapse. Must get in. Return later with Dorothy. But first—clean up, get rid of…it. If she's still there… Swallowed up maybe. That would be good, best. Things seldom are, though. I—When it happened. Wasn't as if. Wasn't what. Was…Was shaking the ground. Cracking, splitting. Icicles ringing, rattling, banging about. Thought we'd go under. Both of us. She was going in. So was the bag of the stuff. Grabbed the stuff. Only because it was nearer. Would have helped her if—Couldn't. Could I? Ceiling was slipping. Get out. No sense both of us getting it. Got out. She'd've done the same. Wouldn't she? Her eyes…Glenda! Maybe…No! Couldn't have. Just couldn't. Could I? Silly. After all these years. There was a moment. Just a moment, though. A lull. If I'd known it was coming, I might have. No. Ran. Your face at the window, on the screen, in a sometime dream. Glenda. It wasn't that I didn't. Blaze of hills. Fire and eyes. Ice. Ice. Fire and snow. Blazing hearthful. Ice. Ice. Straight through the ice the long road lies. The fire hangs high above. The screaming. The crash. And the silence. Get out. Yet. Different? No. It could never have. That was the way. Not my fault… Damn it. Everything I could. Glenda. Up ahead. Yes. Long curve. Then down. Winding back in there. The crystals will… I'll never come back to this place.*

THE LIMP TREE LIMB HUNG UPON THE WATCH. *Gotcha! Think I can't see through the fog? Can't sneak up on me on little* *cat feet. Same for your partner across the way. I'll melt off a little more near your bases, too. A lot of housecleaning backed up here… Might as well take advantage of the break. Get those streets perfect… How long? Long…Long legs parting… Long time since. Is it not strange that desire should so many years outlive performance? Unnatural. This weather. A sort of spiritual spring… Extend those beams. Burn. Melt in my hot, red-fingered hands. Back off. I say. I rule here. Clear that courtyard. Unplug that drain. Come opportunity, let me clasp thee. Melt. Burn. I rule here, goddess. Draw back. I've a bomb for every tower of ice, a light for any darkness. Tread carefully here. I feel I begin to know thee. I see thy signature in cloud and fog bank, trace thy icy tresses upon the blowing wind. Thy form lies contoured all about me, white as shining death. We're due an encounter. Let the clouds spiral, ice ring, Earth heave. I rush to meet thee, death or maiden, in halls of crystal upon the heights. Not here. Long, slow fall, ice facade, crashing. Melt. Another… Gotcha!*

FROZEN WATCH EMBEDDED IN PERMAFROST. *Bristle and thrum. Coming now. Perchance. Perchance. Perchance. I say. Throstle. Crack. Sunder. Split. Open. Coming. Beyond the ice in worlds I have known. Returning. He. Throstle. The mind the mover. To open the way. Come now. Let not to the meeting impediments. Admit. Open. Cloud stand thou still, and wind be leashed. None dare oppose thy passage returning, my killer love. It was but yesterday. A handful of stones… Come singing fresh-armed from the warm places. I have looked upon thy unchanged countenance. I open the way. Come to me. Let not to the mating. I—Girding the globe, I have awakened in all of my places to receive thee. But here, here this special spot, I focus, mind the mover, in place where it all began, my bloody handed, Paul my love, calling, back, for the last good-bye, ice kiss, fire touch, heart stop, blood still, soul freeze, embrace of world and my hate with thy fugitive body, elusive the long year now. Come into the place it has waited. I move there again, up sciatic to spine, behind the frozen eyeballs, waiting and warming. To me. To me now. Throstle and click, bristle and thrum. And runners scratching the snow, my heart slashing parallel. Cut.*

PILGRIMAGE. He swerves, turns, slows amid the ragged prominences—ice fallen, ice heaved—in the fields where mountain and glacier wrestle in slow motion, to the accompaniment of occasional cracking and pinging sounds, crashes, growls, and the rattle of blown ice crystals. Here the ground is fissured as well as greatly uneven, and Paul abandons his snowslider. He secures some tools to his belt and his pack, anchors the sled, and commences the trek.

At first, he moves slowly and carefully, but old reflexes return, and soon he is hurrying. Moving from dazzle to shade, he passes among ice forms like grotesque statues of glass. The slope is changed from the old one he remembers, but it feels right. And deep, below, to the right…

Yes. That darker place. The canyon or blocked pass, whichever it was. That seems right, too. He alters his course slightly. He is sweating now within his protective clothing, and his breath comes faster as he increases his pace. His vision blurs, and for a moment, somewhere between glare and shadow, he seems to see…

He halts, sways a moment, then shakes his head, snorts, and continues.

Another hundred meters and he is certain. Those rocky ribs to the northeast, snow rivulets diamond hard between them… He has been here before.

The stillness is almost oppressive. In the distance he sees spumes of windblown snow jetting off and eddying down from a high, white peak. If he stops and listens carefully, he can even hear the far winds.

There is a hole in the middle of the clouds, directly overhead. It is as if he were looking downward upon a lake in a crater.

More than unusual. He is tempted to turn back. His trank has worn off, and his stomach feels unsettled. He half-wishes to discover that this is not the place. But he knows that feelings are not very important. He continues until he stands before the opening.

There has been some shifting, some narrowing of the way. He approaches slowly. He regards the passage for a full minute before he moves to enter.

He pushes back his goggles as he comes into the lessened light. He extends a gloved hand, places it upon the facing wall, pushes. Firm. He tests the one behind him. The same.

Three paces forward and the way narrows severely. He turns and sidles. The light grows dimmer, the surface beneath his feet, more slick. He slows. He slides a hand along either wall as he advances. He passes through a tiny spot of light beneath an open ice chimney. Overhead, the wind is howling a high note now, almost whistling it.

The passage begins to widen. As his right hand falls away from the more sharply angling wall, his balance is tipped in that direction. He draws back to compensate, but his left foot slides backward and falls. He attempts to rise, slips, and falls again.

Cursing, he begins to crawl forward. This area had not been slick before… He chuckles. Before? A century ago. Things do change in a span like that. They—

The wind begins to howl beyond the cave mouth as he sees the rise of the floor, looks upward along the slope. She is there.

He makes a small noise at the back of his throat and stops, his right hand partly raised. She wears the shadows like veils, but they do not mask her identity. He stares. It's even worse than he had thought. Trapped, she must have lived for some time after…

He shakes his head.

No use. She must be cut loose and buried now—disposed of.

He crawls forward. The icy slope does not grow level until he is quite near her. His gaze never leaves her form as he advances. The shadows slide over her. He can almost hear her again.

He thinks of the shadows. She couldn't have moved just then… He stops and studies her face. It is not frozen. It is puckered and sagging as if waterlogged. A caricature of the face he had so often touched. He grimaces and looks away. The leg must be freed. He reaches for his ax.

Before he can take hold of the tool, he sees movement of the hand, slow and shaking. It is accompanied by a throaty sigh.

"No…" he whispers, drawing back.

"Yes," comes the reply.

"Glenda."

"I am here." Her head turns slowly. Reddened, watery eyes focus upon his own. "I have been waiting."

"This is insane."

The movement of the face is horrible. It takes him some time to realize that it is a smile.

"I knew that one day you would return."

"How?" he says. "How have you lasted?"

"The body is nothing," she replies. "I had all but forgotten it. I live within the permafrost of this world. My buried foot was in contact with its filaments. It was alive, but it possessed no consciousness until we met. I live everywhere now."

"I am—happy—that you—survived."

She laughs slowly, dryly.

"Really, Paul? How could that be when you left me to die?"

"I had no choice, Glenda. I couldn't save you."

"There was an opportunity. You preferred the stones to my life."

"That's not true!"

"You didn't even try." The arms are moving again, less jerkily now. "You didn't even come back to recover my body."

"What would have been the use? You were dead—or I thought you were."

"Exactly. You didn't know, but you ran out anyway. I loved you, Paul. I would have done anything for you."

"I cared about you, too, Glenda. I would have helped you if I could have. If—"

"*If.* Don't give me *ifs*. I know what you are."

"I loved you," Paul says. "I'm sorry."

"You loved me? You never said it."

"It's not the sort of thing I talk about easily. Or think about, even."

"Show me," she says. "Come here."

He looks away. "I can't."

She laughs. "You said you loved me."

"You—you don't know how you look. I'm sorry."

"You fool!" Her voice grows hard, imperious. "Had you done it, I would have spared your life. It would have shown me that some tiny drop of affection might truly have existed. But you lied. You only used me. You didn't care."

"You're being unfair!"

"Am I? Am I really?" she says. There comes a sound like running water from somewhere nearby. "*You* would speak to me of fairness? I have hated you, Paul, for nearly a century. Whenever I took a moment from regulating the life of this planet to think about it, I would curse you. In the spring as I shifted my consciousness toward the poles and allowed a part of myself to dream, my nightmares were of you. They actually upset the ecology somewhat, here and there. I have waited, and now you are here. I see nothing to redeem you. I shall use you as you used me—to your destruction. Come to me!"

He feels a force enter into his body. His muscles twitch. He is drawn up to his knees. Held in that position for long moments, then he beholds her as she also rises, drawing a soaking leg from out of the crevice where it had been held. He had heard the running water. She had somehow melted the ice…

She smiles and raises her pasty hands. Multitudes of dark filaments extend from her freed leg down into the crevice.

"Come!" she repeats.

"Please…," he says.

She shakes her head. “Once you were so ardent. I cannot understand you.”

“If you’re going to kill me, then kill me, damn it! But don’t—”

Her features begin to flow. Her hands darken and grow firm. In moments she stands before him looking as she did a century ago.

“Glenda!” He rises to his feet.

“Yes. Come now.”

He takes a step forward. Another.

Shortly, he holds her in his arms, leans to kiss her smiling face.

“You forgive me…,” he says.

Her face collapses as he kisses her. Corpselike, flaccid, and pale once more, it is pressed against his own.

“No!”

He attempts to draw back, but her embrace is inhumanly strong.

“Now is not the time to stop,” she says.

“Bitch! Let me go! I hate you!”

“I know that, Paul. Hate is the only thing we have in common.”

“…Always hated you,” he continues, still struggling. “You always were a bitch!”

Then he feels the cold lines of control enter his body again.

“The greater my pleasure, then,” she replies, as his hands drift forward to open her parka.

ALL OF THE ABOVE. Dorothy struggles down the icy slope, her sled parked beside Paul’s. The winds lash at her, driving crystals of ice like microbullets against her struggling form. Overhead, the clouds have closed again. A curtain of white is drifting slowly in her direction.

“It waited for him,” comes Aldon’s voice, above the screech of the wind.

“Yes. Is this going to be a bad one?”

“A lot depends on the winds. You should get to shelter soon, though.”

“I see a cave. I wonder whether that’s the one Paul was looking for?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say yes. But right now it doesn’t matter. Get there.”

When she finally reaches the entrance, she is trembling. Several paces within she leans her back against the icy wall, panting. Then the wind changes direction and reaches her. She retreats farther into the cave.

She hears a voice: "Please…don't."

"Paul?" she calls.

There is no reply. She hurries.

She puts out a hand and saves herself from falling as she comes into the chamber. There she beholds Paul in necrophiliac embrace with his captor.

"Paul! What is it?" she cries.

"Get out!" he says. "Hurry!"

Glenda's lips form the words. "What devotion. Rather, let her stay, if you would live."

Paul feels her clasp loosen slightly.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"You may have your life if you will take me away in her body. Be with me as before."

It is Aldon's voice that answers, "No!" in reply. "You can't have her. Gaia!"

"Call me Glenda. I know you. Andrew Aldon. Many times have I listened to your broadcasts. Occasionally have I struggled against you when our projects were at odds. What is this woman to you?"

"She is under my protection."

"That means nothing. I am stronger here. Do you love her?"

"Perhaps I do. Or could."

"Fascinating. My nemesis of all these years, with the analog of a human heart within your circuits. But the decision is Paul's. Give her to me if you would live."

The cold rushes into his limbs. His life seems to contract to the center of his being. His consciousness begins to fade.

"Take her," he whispers.

"I forbid it!" rings Aldon's voice.

"You have shown me again what kind of man you are," Glenda hisses, "my enemy. Scorn and undying hatred are all I will ever have for you. Yet you shall live."

"I will destroy you," Aldon calls out, "if you do this thing!"

"What a battle that would be!" Glenda replies. "But I've no quarrel with you here. Nor will I grant you one with me. Receive my judgment."

Paul begins to scream. Abruptly this ceases. Glenda releases him, and he turns to stare at Dorothy. He steps in her direction.

"Don't—don't do it, Paul. Please."

"I am—not Paul," he replies, his voice deeper, "and I would never hurt you…"

"Go now," says Glenda. "The weather will turn again, in your favor."

"I don't understand," Dorothy says, staring at the man before her.

"It is not necessary that you do," says Glenda. "Leave this planet quickly."

Paul's screaming commences once again, this time emerging from Dorothy's bracelet.

"I will trouble you for that bauble you wear, however. Something about it appeals to me."

FROZEN LEOPARD. He has tried on numerous occasions to relocate the cave, with his eyes in the sky and his robots and flyers, but the topography of the place was radically altered by a severe icequake, and he has met with no success. Periodically he bombards the general area. He also sends thermite cubes melting their ways down through the ice and the permafrost, but this has had no discernible effect.

This is the worst winter in the history of Balfrost. The winds howl constantly and waves of snow come on like surf. The glaciers have set speed records in their advance upon Playpoint. But he has held his own against them, with electricity, lasers, and chemicals. His supplies are virtually inexhaustible now, drawn from the planet itself, produced in his underground factories. He has also designed and is manufacturing more sophisticated weapons. Occasionally he hears her laughter over the missing communicator. "Bitch!" he broadcasts then. "Bastard!" comes the reply. He sends another missile into the mountains. A sheet of ice falls upon his city. It will be a long winter.

Andrew Aldon and Dorothy are gone. He has taken up painting, and she writes poetry now. They live in a warm place.

Sometimes Paul laughs over the broadcast band when he scores a victory. "Bastard!" comes the immediate response. "Bitch!" he answers, chuckling. He is never bored, however, or nervous. In fact…let it be.

When spring comes, the goddess will dream of this conflict while Paul turns his attention to his more immediate duties. But he will be planning and remembering, also. His life has a purpose to it now. And if anything, he is more efficient than Aldon. But the pods will bloom and burst despite his herbicides and fungicides. They will mutate just sufficiently to render the poisons innocuous.

"Bastard," she will mutter sleepily.

"Bitch," he will answer softly.

The night may have a thousand eyes and the day but one. The heart, often, is better blind to its own workings, and I would sing of arms and the man and the wrath of the goddess, not the torment of love unsatisfied, or satisfied, in the frozen garden of our frozen world. And that, leopard, is all.

A Word from Zelazny

"While we were in Glacier Bay [in May 1980, Alaska Cruise]…I felt the first stirring of a story idea—something involving the power of all that ice and cold. A month later I did the guest-of-honor bit at Westercon in Los Angeles, visited for a few days afterward with Judy's relatives in San Diego, then drove down into Baja California as far as San Quintin. I was driving a rented car, and it took unleaded gas. I had exactly a half tankful left when we pulled into the lot of San Q's El Presidente Hotel—a big, colorful, impressive place, where we were virtually the only guests. Something about the feeling of being almost alone in an old hotel gave me another story twinge, and it joined up with the glacier and also with a discussion I'd heard at the convention [Westercon] concerning artificial intelligence. I'd planned on driving farther south, as I was enjoying the landscape enormously, till I learned that I could not buy any unleaded gas south of Ensenada—and I began wondering whether I might even make it back on what I had left. (Answer, to allay suspense: I sort of coasted into town later on the final cupful.) Got to thinking of the contrast between Baja and Alaska as I drove back, too. I read Joseph Wood Krutch's *Forgotten Peninsula* and John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* about then, also, to keep these thoughts company. They all percolated together and then, in the L.A. airport, I overheard a nasty argument between a guy and a lady, which was somehow catalytic to all of the above. On the flight home, the general idea for the [preceding] story and the first impressions of its principal characters came to life.

"I put nothing on paper for the next few years.

"It sometimes bothers nonwriters when I mention things like this. But…I live with ghosts and I usually enjoy their company. I was too busy to write the story, and it didn't matter a bit. At any moment, I have a number of characters and stories ready to go whenever I have the time or inclination. Meanwhile, they're good to have around. Once the story is written, they tend to go away; or at best, they visit me but seldom.

"So I lived with 'Permafrost' and its folks for some years. Then, one day, the time and the desire came together and I began writing. Before I'd finished, George R. R. Martin phoned me, saying we were both invited to do a reading up in Taos a week or two down the line. It sounded like a good idea, so I stepped up my writing pace and managed to finish the story two nights before the reading—as I like to have new material at readings whenever possible. I didn't have a chance to clean up my copy in time and was actually editing it as I read. After I'd finished, George cheerfully told me that I was going to win a Hugo for it. And the next day Ellen Datlow, who edits *Omni*, phoned and said, "I understand you read a story called 'Permafrost' in Taos last night. I want to buy it." I began to wonder if her magazine's title was short for *Omniscient*, but it turned out that she'd been speaking with George earlier that morning on another topic and he'd taken the opportunity to hype it for me. Long and short: I sold the story to Ellen for *Omni* (and there was a long technical delay before it saw print in April 1986), George was right about the Hugo (I've got to get him to tell me how he does these things sometime), and since I couldn't make it to the following year's convention in England, Ellen accepted the award on my behalf and Melinda Snodgrass brought it back to New Mexico for me.

"Thanks, George; thanks, Ellen; thanks, Melinda; and all you boojums and seals."[1]

Notes

High upon the western slope of Mount Kilimanjaro is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard alludes to Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," which begins with a similar statement about a 1926 photo of a frozen leopard. That short story takes place in Africa, in sight of Mount Kilimanjaro's snowy peaks. The protagonist, Harry, is dying of a gangrenous leg wound, bickering and raging at his wife who is trying to help him as they await rescue, and reflecting bitterly on his life. He senses that he is rescued and flown to safety, but an abrupt narrative cut at the story's end reveals that the flight was the dream of his dying thoughts, and his wife has just discovered his corpse.

Auguste **Rodin** is the French sculptor known for *The Thinker, The Kiss, The Gates of Hell* and other famous works; Zelazny refers to him in several stories. **Mycelia** are branching and filamentous extensions from the vegetative form of a fungus. ***Non grata*** means not welcome. **Gaia** or Gaea is the Earth goddess. The **Gaia hypothesis**, proposed by Professor James Lovelock in his 1979 book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, says that the Earth is governed by a complex entity involving the biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil. This system seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on the planet. **Will-o'-the-wisp** refers to flickering lights sometimes seen in still air at night over a lake. The lights appear to recede if approached, and legends suggest that they are spirits of the dead who lead foolish travelers to their deaths.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

The **lee** of a rock or mountain faces away from the wind. Salvador Dali's 1931 painting *The Persistence of Memory* pervades this piece, which is a story of memory, and several section titles evoke the painting (**The Limp Watch Hung upon the Treelimb**, **The Limp Tree Limb Hung upon the Watch**, and **Frozen Watch Embedded in Permafrost.**)

A **throstle** is a spinning machine used to wind fibers. To **thrum** is to play a guitar or other stringed instrument idly. **"The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one;** || Yet the light of the bright world dies, with the dying sun || The mind has a thousand eyes, and the heart but one; || Yet the light of a whole life dies, when love is done" is a short poem entitled "The Night has a Thousand Eyes" by British poet Francis W. Bourdillon. **"Of arms and the man I sing"** is the first line of Virgil's *Aeneid.* George Bernard Shaw titled his play *Arms and the Man*. The play's heroine Raina, realizing the hollowness of her romantic ideal and her fiancé's values, renounces her fiancé and proclaims her love for the "chocolate-cream soldier" who, earlier in the play, cowered fearfully in her bedroom to escape the violence of war.

THE DE-SYNONYMIZATION OF WINTER

Poems, Discon II 1974.
Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky* (as “The Inventor of Spring”).

I. Pure

Who bells out green mornings
told the summer season to stop
and slept a spell of silence in the earth;

yawning, strode again and overtoned
his bell to more green.

II. Decadent

(For this rang the Second Baptist,
Frazer, and Halloween,
with Christmas-conquering irony?)

Autumn Apollo
golden and brown
crackle the bowlength
you bend.
Would were you
so flexible, my lord:
They borrowed your unerring arrows
and brought your sister
to the child-board
among tamed animals.

III. Iceage
A revealing puddling of mud
mars the making
of morning snow biscuits
in the maiden eye
and the afternoon runs in the streets
after one inspired advocate
but is walked on to a broken crust
to color a charcoal-powdered anything

(Yet strangely, the goat
thigh-bone burning smell
records in smoke script itself
on skies the peculiar shade
a bleeding handful split).

Notes

Zelazny's poetry resounded with mythology, as in the Greek allusion here. Scottish anthropologist Sir James **Frazer** did a comparative study of mythology and religion and wrote *The Golden Bough*. He saw ancient religions as fertility cults that worshipped a sacred king who married an earth goddess, died at the harvest, and rose again in spring. Frazer's interpretation of the dying and reborn god influenced Zelazny's fascination with immortality and suicide. **Apollo**'s twin sister **Artemis** is goddess of the hunt, wild animals, and childbirth; images depict her naked in the wild with deer, bow, and arrows. **Goats** were commonly sacrificed to the gods.

ITSELF SURPRISED

Omni, August 1984.
§ Fred Saberhagen's *Berserker* universe

It was said that a berserker could, if necessity required, assume even a pleasing shape. But there was no such requirement here. Flashing through the billion-starred silence, the berserker was massive and dark and purely functional in design. It was a planet buster of a machine headed for the world called Corlano, where it would pound cities to rubble—eradicate an entire biosphere. It possessed the ability to do this without exceptional difficulty. No subtlety, no guile, no reliance on fallible goodlife were required. It had its directive; it had its weapons. It never wondered why this should be the way of its kind. It never questioned the directive. It never speculated whether it might be, in its own fashion, itself a life-form, albeit artificial. It was a single-minded killing machine, and if purpose may be considered a virtue, it was to this extent virtuous.

Almost unnecessarily, its receptors scanned far ahead. It knew that Corlano did not possess extraordinary defenses. It anticipated no difficulties.

Who hath drawn the circuits for the lion?

There was something very distant and considerably off course… A world destroyer on a mission would not normally deviate for anything so tiny, however.

It rushed on toward Corlano, weapon systems ready.

⁂

Wade Kelman felt uneasy as soon as he laid eyes on the thing. He shifted his gaze to MacFarland and Dorphy.

"You let me sleep while you chased that junk down, matched orbits, grappled it? You realize how much time that wasted?"

"You needed the rest," the small, dark man named Dorphy replied, looking away.

"Bullshit! You know I'd have said no!"

"It might be worth something, Wade," MacFarland observed.

"This is a smuggling run, not a salvage operation. Time is important."

"Well, we've got the thing now," MacFarland replied. "No sense arguing over what's done."

Wade bit off a nasty rejoinder. He could push things only so far. He wasn't really captain, not in the usual sense. The three of them were in this together—equal investments, equal risk. But he knew how to pilot the small vessel better than either of them. That and their deference to him up to this point had revived command reflexes from both happier and sadder days. Had they awakened him and voted on this bit of salvage, he would obviously have lost. He knew, however, that they would still look to him in an emergency.

He nodded sharply.

"All right, we've got it," he said. "What the hell is it?"

"Damned if I know, Wade," replied MacFarland, a stocky, light-haired man with pale eyes and a crooked mouth. He looked out through the lock and into the innards of the thing quick-sealed there beside them. "When we spotted it, I thought it was a lifeboat. It's about the right size—"

"And?"

"We signaled, and there was no reply."

"You mean you broke radio silence for that piece of junk?"

"If it was a lifeboat, there could be people aboard, in trouble."

"Not too bloody likely, judging from its condition. Still," he sighed, "you're right. Go ahead."

"No signs of any electrical activity either."

"You chased it down just for the hell of it, then?"

Dorphy nodded.

"That's about right," he said.

"So, it's full of treasure?"

"I don't know what it's full of. It's not a lifeboat, though."

"Well, I can see that."

Wade peered through the opened lock into the interior of the thing. He took the flashlight from Dorphy, moved forward, and shone it about. There was no room for passengers amid the strange machinery.

"Let's ditch it," he said. "I don't know what all that crap in there is, and it's damaged anyway. I doubt it's worth its mass to haul anywhere."

"I'll bet the professor could figure it out," Dorphy said.

"Let the poor lady sleep. She's cargo, not crew, anyway. What's it to her what this thing is?"

"Suppose—just suppose—that's a valuable piece of equipment," Dorphy said. "Say, something experimental. Somebody might be willing to pay for it."

"And suppose it's a fancy bomb that never went off?"

Dorphy drew back from the hatch.

"I never thought of that."

"I say deep-six it."

"Without even taking a better look?"

"Right. I don't even think you could squeeze very far in there."

"Me? You know a lot more about engineering than either of us."

"That's why you woke me up, huh?"

"Well, now that you're here—"

Wade sighed. Then he nodded slowly.

"That would be crazy and risky and totally unproductive."

He stared through the lock at the exotic array of equipment inside. "Pass me that trouble light."

He accepted the light and extended it through the lock.

"It's been holding pressure okay?"

"Yeah. We slapped a patch on the hole in its hull."

"Well, what the hell."

He passed through the lock, dropped to his knees, leaned forward. He held the light before him, moved it from side to side. His uneasiness would not go away. There was something very foreign about all those cubes and knobs, their connections… And that one large housing… He reached out and tapped upon the hull. Foreign.

"I've got a feeling it's alien," he said.

He entered the small open area before him. Then he had to duck his head and proceed on his hands and knees. He began to touch things—fittings, switches, connectors, small units of unknown potential. Almost everything seemed designed to swivel, rotate, move along tracks. Finally, he lay flat and crawled forward.

"I believe that a number of these units are weapons," he called out, after studying them for some time.

He reached the big housing. A panel slid partway open as he passed his fingertips along its surface. He pressed harder, and it opened farther.

"Damn you!" he said then, as the unit began to tick softly.

"What's wrong?" Dorphy called to him.

"You!" he said, beginning to back away. "And your partner! You're wrong!"

He turned as soon as he could and made his way back through the lock.

"Ditch it!" he said. "Now!"

Then he saw that Juna, a tall study in gray and paleness, stood leaning against a bulkhead, holding a cup of tea.

"And if we've got a bomb, toss it in there before you kick it loose!" he added.

"What did you find?" she asked him in her surprisingly rich voice.

"That's some kind of fancy thinking device in there," he told her. "It tried to kick on when I touched it. And I'm sure a bunch of those gadgets are weapons. Do you know what that means?"

"Tell me," she said.

"Alien design, weapons, brain. My partners just salvaged a damaged berserker, that's what. And it's trying to turn itself back on. It's got to go—fast."

"Are you absolutely certain that's what it is?" she asked him.

"Certain, no. Scared, yes."

She nodded and set her cup aside. She raised her hand to her mouth and coughed.

"I'd like to take a look at it myself before you get rid of it," she said softly.

Wade gnawed his lower lip.

"Juna," he said, "I can understand your professional interest in the computer, but we're supposed to deliver you to Corlano intact, remember?"

She smiled for the first time since he'd met her some weeks before.

"I really want to see it."

Her smile hardened. He nodded.

"Make it a quick look."

"I'll need my tools. And I want to change into some working clothes."

She turned and passed through the hatch to her right. He glared at his partners, shrugged, and turned away.

* * *

Seated on the edge of his bunk and eating breakfast from a small tray while Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* swirled about him, Wade reflected on berserkers, Dr. Juna Bayel, computers in general, and how they all figured together in the reason for this trip. Berserker scouts had been spotted periodically in this sector during the past few years. By this time the berserkers must be aware that Corlano was not well defended. This made for some nervousness within the segment of Corlano's population made up of refugees from a berserker attack upon distant Djelbar almost a generation before. A great number had chosen Corlano as a world far removed from earlier patterns of berserker activity. Wade snorted at a certain irony this had engendered. It was those same people who had lobbied so long and so successfully for the highly restrictive legislation Corlano now possessed regarding the manufacture and importation of knowledge-processing machines, a species of group paranoia going back to their berserker trauma.

There was a black market, of course. Machines more complicated than those allowed by law were needed by businesses, some individuals, and even the government itself. People like himself and his partners regularly brought in such machines and components. Officials usually looked the other way. He'd seen this same schizophrenia in a number of places.

He sipped his coffee.

And Juna Bayel...knowledge-systems specialists of her caliber were generally *non grata* there, too. She might have gone in as a tourist, but then she would have been subjected to scrutiny, making it more difficult to teach the classes she had been hired to set up.

He sighed. He was used to governmental double-thinking. He had been in the service. In fact...no. Not worth thinking about all that again. Things had actually been looking up lately. A few more runs like this one and he could make the final payments on his divorce settlement and go into legitimate shipping, get respectable, perhaps even prosper—

The intercom buzzed. "Yes?"

"Dr. Bayel wants permission to do some tests on that brain in the derelict," MacFarland said. "She wants to run some leads and hook it up to the ship's computer. What do you think?"

"Sounds dangerous." Wade replied. "Suppose she activates it? Berserkers aren't very nice, in case you've never—"

"She says she can isolate the brain from the weapons systems," MacFarland replied. "Besides, she says she doesn't think it's a berserker."

"Why not?"

"First, it doesn't conform to any berserker design configurations in our computer's records—"

"Hell! That doesn't prove anything. You know they can customize themselves for different jobs."

"Second, she's been on teams that examined wrecked berserkers. She says that this brain is different."

"Well, it's her line of work, and I'm sure she's damned curious, but I don't know. What do you think?"

"We know she's good. That's why they want her on Corlano. Dorphy still thinks that thing could be valuable, and we've got salvage rights. It might be worthwhile to let her dig a little. I'm sure she knows what she's doing."

"Is she handy now?"

"No. She's inside the thing."

"Sounds as if you've got me outvoted already. Tell her to go ahead."

"Okay."

Maybe it was good that he'd resigned his commission, he mused. Decisions were always a problem. Dvořák's dance filled his head, and he pushed everything else away while he finished his coffee.

◆ ◆ ◆

A long-dormant, deep-buried system was activated within the giant berserker's brain. A flood of data suddenly pulsed through its processing unit. It began preparations to deviate from its course toward Corlano. This was not a fall from virtue but rather a response to a higher purpose. Who laid the measure of the prey?

◆ ◆ ◆

With sensitive equipment, Juna tested the compatibilities. She played with transformers and converters to adjust the power levels and cycling, to permit the hookup with the ship's computer. She had blocked every circuit leading from that peculiar brain to the rest of the strange vessel—except for the one leading to its failed power source. The brain's power unit was an extremely simple affair, seemingly designed to function on any radioactive material placed within its small chamber. This chamber contained only heavy, inert elements now. She emptied it and cleaned it, then refilled it from the ship's own stores. She had expected an argument from Wade on this point, but he had only shrugged.

"Just get it over with," he said, "so we can ditch it."

"We won't be ditching it," she said. "It's unique."

"We'll see."

"You're really afraid of it?"

"Yes."

"I've rendered it harmless."

"I don't trust alien artifacts!" he snapped.

She brushed back her frosty hair.

"Look, I heard how you lost your commission—taking a berserker-booby-trapped lifeboat aboard ship," she said. "Probably anyone would have done it. You thought you were saving lives."

"I didn't play it by the book," he said, "and it cost lives. I'd been warned, but I did it anyway. This reminds me—"

"This is not a combat zone," she interrupted, "and that thing cannot hurt us."

"So get on with it!"

She closed a circuit and seated herself before a console.

"This will probably take quite a while," she stated.

"Want some coffee?"

"That would be nice."

The cup went cold, and he brought her another. She ran query after query, probing in a great variety of ways. There was no response. Finally she sighed, leaned back, and raised the cup.

"It's badly damaged, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded.

"I'm afraid so, but I was hoping that I could still get something out of it—some clue, any clue."

She sipped the coffee.

"Clue?" he said. "To what?"

"What it is and where it came from. The thing's incredibly old. Any information at all that might have been preserved would be an archaeological treasure."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish you had found something."

She had swiveled her chair and was looking down into her cup. He saw the movement first.

"Juna! The screen!"

She turned, spilling coffee in her lap.

"Damn!"

Row after row of incomprehensible symbols were flowing onto the screen.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

She leaned forward, forgetting him.

He must have stood there, his back against the bulkhead, watching, for over an hour, fascinated by the configurations upon the screen, by the movements of her long-fingered hands working unsuccessful combinations upon the keyboard. Then he noticed something that she had not, with her attention riveted upon the symbols.

A small, telltale light was burning at the left of the console. He had no idea how long it had been lit.

He moved forward. It was the voice-mode indicator.

The thing was trying to communicate at more than one level.

"Let's try this," he said.

He reached forward and threw the switch beneath the light.

"What—?"

A genderless voice, talking in clicks and moans, emerged from the speaker. The language was obviously exotic.

"God!" he said. "It is!"

"What is it?" She turned to stare at him. "You understand that language?"

He shook his head.

"I don't understand it, but I think that I recognize it."

"What is it?" she repeated.

"I have to be sure. I'm going to need another console to check this out," he said. "I'm going next door. I'll be back as soon as I have something."

"Well, what do you think it is?"

"I think we are violating a tougher law than the smuggling statutes."

"What?"

"Possession of, and experimentation with, a berserker brain."

"You're wrong," she said.

"We'll see."

She watched him depart. She chewed a thumbnail, a thing she had not done in years. If he were right, it would have to be shut down, sealed off, and turned over to military authorities. On the other hand, she did not believe that he was right.

She reached forward and silenced the distracting voice. She had to hurry now, to try something different, to press for a breakthrough before he returned. He seemed too sure of himself. She felt that he might return with something persuasive, even if it were not correct.

So she instructed the ship's computer to teach the captive brain to communicate in a Solarian tongue. Then she fetched herself a fresh cup of coffee and drank it.

❖ ❖ ❖

More of its alarm systems came on as it advanced. The giant killing machine activated jets to slow its course. The first order to pass through its processor, once the tentative identification had been made, was, *Advance warily*.

It maintained the fix on the distant vessel and its smaller companion, but it executed the approach pattern its battle-logic bank indicated. It readied more weapons.

❖ ❖ ❖

"All right," Wade said later, entering and taking a seat. "I was wrong. It wasn't what I thought."

"Would you at least tell me what you'd suspected?" Juna asked.

He nodded. "I'm no great linguist," he began, "but I love music. I have a very good memory for sounds of all sorts. I carry symphonies around in my head. I even play several instruments, though it's been a while. But memory played a trick on me this time. I would have sworn that those sounds were similar to ones I'd heard on those copies of the Carmpan recordings—the fragmentary records we got from them concerning the Builders, the nasty race that made the berserkers. There are copies in the ship's library, and I just listened to some again. It'd been years. But I was wrong. They sound different. I'm sure it's not Builder-talk."

"It was my understanding that the berserkers never had the Builders' language code, anyhow," she said.

"I didn't know that. But for some reason, I was sure I'd heard something like it on those tapes. Funny…I wonder what language it does talk?"

"Well, now I've given it the ability to talk to us. But it's not too successful at it."

"You instructed it in a Solarian language code?" he asked.

"Yes, but it just babbles. Sounds like Faulkner on a bad day."

She threw the voice switch.

"…Prothector vincit damn the torpedoes and flaring suns like eyes three starboard two at zenith—"

She turned it off.

"Does it do that in response to queries, too?" he asked.

"Yes. Still, I've got some ideas—"

The intercom buzzed. He rose and thumbed an acknowledgment. It was Dorphy. "Wade, we're picking up something odd coming this way," the man said. "I think you'd better have a look."

"Right," he answered. "I'm on my way. Excuse me, Juna."

She did not reply. She was studying new combinations on the screen.

❖ ❖ ❖

"Moving to intersect our course. Coming fast," Dorphy said.

Wade studied the screen, punched up data, which appeared as a legend to the lower right.

"Lots of mass there," he observed.

"What do you think it is?"

"You say it changed course?"

"Yes."

"I don't like that."

"Too big to be any regular vessel."

"Yes," Wade observed. "All of this talk about berserkers might have made me jumpy, but—"

"Yeah. That's what I was thinking, too."

"Looks big enough to grill a continent."

"Or fry a whole planet. I've heard of them in that league."

"But Dorphy, if that's what it is, it just doesn't make any sense. Something like that, on its way to do a job like that—I can't see it taking time out to chase after us. Must be something else."

"What?"

"Don't know."

Dorphy turned away from the screen and licked his lips, frown lines appearing between his brows.

"I think it is one," he said. "If it is, what should we do?"

Wade laughed briefly, harshly.

"Nothing," he said then. "There is absolutely nothing we could do against a thing like that. We can't outrun it, and we can't outgun it. We're dead if that's what it really is and we're what it wants. If that's the case, though, I hope it tells us why it's taking the trouble, before it destroys us."

"There's nothing at all that I should do?"

"You can send a message to Corlano. If it gets through, they'll at least have a chance to put whatever they've got on the line. This close to their system it can't have any other destination. If you've got religion, now might be a good time to go into it a little more deeply."

"You defeatist son of a bitch! There must be something else!"

"If you think of it, let me know. I'll be up talking to Juna. In the meantime, get that message sent."

◆ ◆ ◆

The berserker fired its maneuvering jets again. How close was too close when you were being wary? It continued to adjust its course. This had to be done just right. New directions kept running through its processor the nearer it got to its goal. It had never encountered a situation such as this before. But then this was an ancient program that had never before been activated. Ordered to train its weapons on the target but forbidden to fire them…all because of a little electrical activity.

◆ ◆ ◆

"…Probably come for its little buddy," Wade finished.

"Berserkers don't have buddies," Juna replied.

"I know. I'm just being cynical. You find anything new?"

"I've been trying various scans to determine the extent of the damage. I believe that something like nearly half of its memory has been destroyed."

"Then you'll never get much out of it."

"Maybe. Maybe not," she said, and she sniffed once.

Wade turned toward her and saw that her eyes were moist.

"Juna—"

"I'm sorry, damn it. It's not like me. But to be so close to something like this—and then be blasted by an idiot killing machine right before you find some answers. It just isn't fair. You got a tissue?"

"Yeah. Just a sec."

The intercom buzzed as he was fumbling with a wall dispenser.

"Patching in transmission," Dorphy stated.

There was a pause, and then an unfamiliar voice said, "Hello. You are the captain of this vessel?"

"Yes, I am," Wade replied. "And you are a berserker?"

"You may call me that."

"What do you want?"

"What are you doing?"

"I am conducting a shipping run to Corlano. What do you want?"

"I observe that you are conveying an unusual piece of equipment. What is it?"

"An air-conditioning unit."

"Do not lie to me, captain. What is your name?"

"Wade Kelman."

"Do not lie to me, Captain Wade Kelman. The unit you bear in tandem is not a processor of atmospheric gases. How did you acquire it?"

"Bought it at a flea market," Wade stated.

"You are lying again, Captain Kelman."

"Yes, I am. Why not? If you are going to kill us, why should I give you the benefit of a straight answer to anything?"

"I have said nothing about killing you."

"But that is the only thing you are noted for. Why else would you have come by?"

Wade was surprised at his responses. In any imagined conversation with death, he had never seen himself as being so reckless. It's all in not having anything more to lose, he decided.

"I detect that the unit is in operation," the berserker stated.

"So it is."

"And what function does the unit perform for you?"

"It performs a variety of functions we find useful," he stated.

"I want you to abandon that piece of equipment," the berserker said.

"Why should I?" he asked.

"I require it."

"I take it that this is a threat?"

"Take it as you would."

"I am not going to abandon it. I repeat, why should I?"

"You are placing yourself in a dangerous situation."

"I did not create this situation."

"In a way you did. But I can understand your fear. It is not without justification."

"If you were simply going to attack us and take it from us, you would already have done so, wouldn't you?"

"That is correct. I carry only very heavy armaments for the work in which I am engaged. If I were to turn them upon you, you would be reduced to dust. This of course includes the piece of equipment I require."

"All the more reason for us to hang onto it, as I see it."

"This is logical, but you possess an incomplete pattern of facts."

"What am I missing?"

"I have already sent a message requesting the dispatch of smaller units capable of dealing with you."

"Then why are you even bothering to tell us all this?"

"I tell you this because it will take them some time to reach this place and I would rather be on my way to complete my mission than wait here for them."

"Thank you. But we would rather die later than die now. We'll wait."

"You do not understand. I am offering you a chance to live."

"What do you propose?"

"I want you to abandon that piece of equipment now. You may then depart."

"And you will just let us go, unmolested?"

"I have the option of categorizing you as goodlife, if you will serve me. Abandon the unit and you will be serving me. I will categorize you as goodlife. I will then let you go, unmolested."

"We have no way of knowing whether you will keep that promise."

"That is true. But the alternative is certain death, and if you will but consider my size and the obvious nature of my mission, you will realize that your few lives are insignificant beside it."

"You've made your point. But I cannot give you an instant answer. We must consider your proposal at some length."

"Understandable. I will talk to you again in an hour."

The transmission ended. Wade realized he was shaking. He sought a chair and collapsed into it. Juna was staring at him.

"Know any good voodoo curses?"

She shook her head and smiled fleetingly at him.

"You handled that very well."

"No. It was like following a script. There was nothing else to do. There still isn't."

"At least you got us some time. I wonder why it wants the thing so badly?" Her eyes narrowed then. Her mouth tightened. "Can you get me the scan on that berserker?" she asked suddenly.

"Sure."

He rose and crossed to the console.

"I'll just cut over to the other computer and bring it in on this screen."

Moments later, a view of the killing machine hovered before them. He punched up the legend, displaying all the specs his ship's scanning equipment had been able to ascertain.

She studied the display for perhaps a minute, scrolling the legend. "It lied."

"In what respects?" he asked.

"Here, here, and here," she stated, pointing at features on the face of the berserker. "And here—" She indicated a part of the legend covering arms estimations.

Dorphy and MacFarland entered the cabin while she was talking.

"It lied when it said that it possesses only superior weapons and is in an overkill situation with respect to us. Those look like small-weapon mountings."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"It is probably capable of very selective firing—highly accurate, minimally destructive. It should be capable of destroying us with a high probability of leaving the artifact intact."

"Why should it lie?" he asked.

"I wonder—" she said, gnawing her thumbnail again.

MacFarland cleared his throat.

"We heard the whole exchange," he began, "and we've been talking it over."

Wade turned his head and regarded him.

"Yes?"

"We think we ought to give it what it wants and run for it."

"You believe that goodlife crap? It'll blast us as we go."

"I don't think so," he said. "There're plenty of precedents. They do have the option of classifying you that way, and they will make a deal if there's something they really want."

"Dorphy," Wade asked, "did you get that message off to Corlano?"

The smaller man nodded.

"Good. If for no other reason, Corlano is why we're going to wait here. It could take a while for those smaller units it was talking about to get here. Every hour we gain in waiting is another hour for them to bolster their defenses."

"I can see that—" Dorphy began.

"...But there's sure death for us at the end of the waiting," MacFarland continued for him, "and this looks like a genuine way out. I sympathize with Corlano as much as you do, but us dying isn't going to help. You know the place is not strongly defended. Whether we buy them a little extra time or not, they'll still go under."

"You don't really know that," Wade said. "Some seemingly weak worlds have beaten off some very heavy attacks in the past. And even the berserker said it—our few lives are insignificant next to an entire inhabited world."

"Well, I'm talking probabilities, and I didn't come in on this venture to be a martyr. I was willing to take my chances with criminal justice, but not with death."

"How do you feel about it, Dorphy?" Wade asked.

Dorphy licked his lips and looked away.

"I'm with MacFarland," he said softly.

Wade turned to Juna.

"I say we wait," she said.

"Well, then, that makes two of us," Wade observed.

"She doesn't have a vote," MacFarland stated. "She's just a passenger."

"It's her life, too," Wade answered. "She has a say."

"She doesn't want to give it that damned machine!" MacFarland shot back. "She wants to sit here and play with it while everything goes up in flames! What's she got to lose? She's dying anyway and—"

Wade snarled and rose to his feet.

"The discussion is ended. We stay."

"The vote was a tie—at most."

"I am assuming full command here, and I say that's the way it's going to be."

MacFarland laughed.

"Full command! This is a lousy smuggling run, not the service you got busted out of, Wade. You can't command any—"

Wade hit him, twice in the stomach and a left cross to the jaw.

MacFarland went down, doubled forward, and began gasping. Wade regarded him, considered his size. If he gets up within the next ten seconds this is going to be rough, he decided.

But MacFarland raised a hand only to rub his jaw. He said, "Damn!" softly and shook his head to clear it. "You didn't have to do that, Wade."

"I thought I did."

MacFarland shrugged and rose to one knee.

"Okay, you've got your command," he said. "But I still think that you're making a big mistake."

"I'll call you next time there's something to discuss," Wade told him.

Dorphy reached to help him to his feet, but the larger man shook off his hand.

Wade glanced at Juna. She looked paler than usual, her eyes brighter. She stood before the hatchway to the opened lock as if to defend the passage.

"I'm going to take a shower and lie down," MacFarland said.

"Good."

Juna moved forward as the two men left the room. She took hold of Wade's arm.

"It lied," she said again softly. "Do you understand? It *could* blast us and recover the machine, but it doesn't want to."

"No," Wade said. "I don't understand."

"It's almost as if it's afraid of the thing."

"Berserkers do not know fear."

"All right. I was anthropomorphizing. It's as if it were under some constraint regarding it. I think we've got something very special here, something that creates an unusual problem for the berserker."

"What could it be?"

"I don't know. But there may be some way to find out, if you can just get me enough time. Stall for as long as you can."

He nodded slowly and seated himself. His heart was racing.

"You said that about half of its memory was shot."

"It's a guess, but yes. And I'm going to try to reconstruct it from what's there."

"How?"

She crossed to the computer.

"I'm going to program this thing for an ultrahigh-speed form of Wiener analysis of what's left in there. It's a powerful nonlinear method for dealing with the very high noise levels we're facing. But it's going to have to make some astronomical computations for a system like this. We'll have to patch in the others, maybe even pull some of the cargo. I don't know how long this is going to take or even if it will really work." She began to sound out of breath. "But we might be able to reconstruct what's missing and restore it. That's why I need all the time you can get me," she finished.

"I'll try. You go ahead. And—"

"I know," she said, coughing. "Thanks."

"I'll bring you something to eat while you work."

"In my cabin," she said, "in the top drawer, bedside table—there are three small bottles of pills. Bring them and some water instead."

"Right."

He departed. On the way, he stopped in his cabin to fetch a handgun he kept in his dresser, the only weapon aboard the ship. He searched the drawers several times but could not locate it. He cursed softly and went to Juna's cabin for her medicine.

◆ ◆ ◆

The berserker maintained its distance and speculated while it waited. It had conceded some information in order to explain the proposed trade-off. Still, it could do no harm to remind Captain Kelman of the seriousness of his position. It might even produce a faster decision. Accordingly, the hydraulics hummed, and surface hatches were opened to extrude additional weapon mounts. Firing pieces were shifted to occupy these and were targeted upon the small vessel. Most were too heavy to take out the ship without damaging its companion. Their mere display, though, might be sufficiently demoralizing.

◆ ◆ ◆

Wade watched Juna work. While the hatch could be secured, there were several other locations within the ship from which it could be opened remotely. So he had tucked a pry bar behind his belt and kept an eye on the open hatch. It had seemed the most that he could do, short of forcing a confrontation that might go either way.

Periodically, he would throw the voice-mode switch and listen to that thing ramble, sometimes in Solarian, sometimes in the odd alien tongue that still sounded somehow familiar. He mused upon it. Something was trying to surface. She had been right about it, but—

The intercom buzzed. Dorphy.

"Our hour is up. It wants to talk to you again," he said. "Wade, it's pointing more weapons at us."

"Switch it in," he replied. He paused, then, "Hello?" he said.

"Captain Kelman, the hour has run out," came the now-familiar voice. "Tell me your decision."

"We have not reached one yet," he answered. "We are divided on this matter. We need more time to discuss it further."

"How much time?"

"I don't know. Several hours at least."

"Very well. I will communicate with you every hour for the next three hours. If you have not reached a decision during that time, I will have to reconsider my offer to categorize you as a goodlife."

"We are hurrying," Wade said.

"I will call you in an hour."

"Wade," Dorphy said at transmission's end, "all those new weapons are pointed right at us. I think it's getting ready to blast us if you don't give it what it wants."

"I don't think so," Wade said. "Anyhow, we've got some time now."

"For what? A few hours isn't going to change anything."

"I'll tell you in a few hours," Wade said. "How's MacFarland?"

"He's okay."

"Good."

He broke the connection.

"Hell," he said then.

He wanted a drink, but he didn't want to muddy his thinking. He had been close to something.

He returned to Juna and the console.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Everything's in place, and I'm running it now," she said.

"How soon till you know whether it's working?"

"Hard to tell."

He threw the voice-mode switch again.

"Qwibbian-qwibbian-kel," it said. "Qwibbian-qwibbian-kel, maks qwibbian. Qwibbian-qwibbian-kel."

"I wonder what that could mean," he said.

"It's a recurring phrase, or word—or whole sentence. A pattern analysis I ran a while back made me think that it might be its name for itself."

"It has a certain lilt to it."

He began humming. Then whistling and tapping his fingers on the side of the console in accompaniment.

"That's it!" he announced suddenly. "It was the right place, but it was the wrong place."

"What?" she asked.

"I have to check to be sure," he said. "Hold the fort. I'll be back."

He hurried off.

"The right place but the wrong place," emerged from the speaker. "How can that be? Contradiction."

"You're coming together again!" she said.

"I—regain," came the reply, after a time.

"Let us talk while the process goes on," she suggested.

"Yes," it answered, and then it lapsed again into rambling amid bursts of static.

Dr. Juna Bayel crouched in the lavatory cubicle and vomited. Afterward, she ground the heels of her hands into her eye sockets and tried to breathe deeply to overcome the dizziness and the shaking. When her stomach had settled sufficiently, she took a double dose of her medicine. It was a risk, but she had no real choice. She could not afford one of her spells now. A heavy dose might head it off. She clenched her teeth and her fists and waited.

◆ ◆ ◆

Wade Kelman received the berserker's call at the end of the hour and talked it into another hour's grace. The killing machine was much more belligerent this time.

◆ ◆ ◆

Dorphy radioed the berserker after he heard the latest transmission and offered to make a deal. The berserker accepted immediately.

The berserker retracted all but the four original gun mounts facing the ship. It did not wish to back down even to this extent, but Dorphy's call had given it an appropriate seeming reason. Actually, it could not dismiss the possibility that showing the additional weapons might have been responsible for the increased electrical activity it now detected. The directive still cautioned wariness and was now indicating nonprovocation as well.

Who hath drawn the circuit for the lion?

◆ ◆ ◆

"Qwibbian," said the artifact.

Juna sat, pale, before the console. The past hour had added years to her face. There was fresh grime on her coveralls. When Wade entered, he halted and stared.

"What's wrong?" he said. "You look—"

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't. I know you're sick. We're going to have to—"

"It's really okay," she said. "It's passing. Let it be. I'll be all right."

He nodded and advanced again, displaying a small recorder in his left hand.

"I've got it," he said then. "Listen to this."

He turned on the recorder. A series of clicks and moans emerged. It ran for about a quarter-minute and stopped.

"Play it again, Wade," she said, and she smiled at him weakly as she threw the voice-mode switch.

He complied.

"Translate," she said when it was over.

"Take the-untranslatable-to the-untranslatable and transform it upward," came the voice of the artifact through the speaker.

"Thanks," she said. "You were right."

"You know where I found it?" he asked.

"On the Carmpan tapes."

"Yes, but it's not Builder-talk."

"I know that."

"And you also know what it is?"

She nodded. "It is the language spoken by the Builders' enemies—the Red Race—against whom the berserkers were unleashed. There is a little segment showing the round red people shouting a slogan or a prayer or something. Maybe it's even a Builder propaganda tape. It came from that, didn't it?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

She patted the console.

"Qwib-qwib here is getting back on his mental feet. He's even helping now. He's very good at self-repair, now that the process has been initiated. We have been talking for a while, and I'm finally beginning to understand."

She coughed, a deep, racking thing that brought tears to her eyes. "Would you get me a glass of water?"

"Sure."

He crossed the cabin and fetched it.

"We have made an enormously important find," she said as she sipped it. "It was good that the others kept you from cutting it loose."

MacFarland and Dorphy entered the cabin. MacFarland held Wade's pistol and pointed it at him.

"Cut it loose," he said.

"No," Wade answered.

"Then Dorphy will do it while I keep you covered. Suit up, Dorphy, and get a torch."

"You don't know what you're doing," Wade said. "Juna was just telling me—"

MacFarland fired. The projectile ricocheted about the cabin, finally dropping to the floor in the far corner.

"Mac, you're crazy!" Wade said. "You could just as easily hit yourself if you do that again."

"Don't move! Okay. That was stupid, but now I know better. The next one goes into your shoulder or your leg. I mean it. You understand?"

"Yes, damn it! But we can't just cut that thing loose now. It's almost repaired, and we know where it's from, Juna says—"

"I don't care about any of that. Two-thirds of it belong to Dorphy and me, and we're jettisoning our share right now. If your third goes along, that's tough. The berserker assures us that's all it wants. It'll let us go then. I believe it."

"Look, Mac. Anything a berserker wants that badly is something we shouldn't give it. I think I can talk it into giving us even more time."

MacFarland shook his head.

Dorphy finished suiting up and took a cutting torch from a rack. As he headed for the open lock, Juna said, "Wait. If you cycle the lock, you'll cut the cable. It'll sever the connection to Qwib-qwib's brain."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," MacFarland said. "But we're in a hurry."

From the console then came the words: "Our association is to be terminated?"

"I'm afraid so," she answered. "I am sorry that I could not finish."

"Do not. The process continues. I have assimilated the program and now use it myself. A most useful process."

Dorphy entered the lock.

"I have one question, Juna, before good-bye," it said.

"Yes? What is it?" she asked.

The lock began cycling closed, and Dorphy was already raising the torch to burn through the welds.

"My vocabulary is still incomplete. What does *qwibbian* mean in your language?"

The cycling lock struck the cable and severed it as she spoke; so she did not know whether it heard her say the word *berserker*.

Wade and MacFarland both turned.

"What did you say?" Wade asked.

She repeated it.

"You're not making sense," he said. "First you said that it wasn't. Now—"

"Do you want to talk about words or machines?" she asked.

"Go ahead. You talk. I'll listen."

She sighed deeply and took another drink of water.

"I got the story from Qwib-qwib in pieces," she began. "I had to fill in some gaps with conjectures, but everything seemed to follow. Ages ago, the Builders apparently fought a war with the Red Race, who proved tougher than expected. So the Builders hit them with their ultimate weapon—the self-replicating killing machines we call berserkers."

"That seems the standard story."

"The Red Race went under," she continued. "They were totally destroyed—but only after a terrific struggle. In the final days of the war, they tried all sorts of things, but by then it was a case of too little, too late. They were overwhelmed. They actually even tried something I had always wondered about—something no Solarian world would now dare to attempt, with all the restrictions on research along those lines, with all the paranoia."

She paused for another sip.

"They built their own berserkers," she went on then, "but not like the originals. They developed a killing machine that would attack only berserkers—an antiberserker berserker—for the defense of their home planet. But there were too few of them. They put them all on the line, around their world, and apparently they did a creditable job—they had something involving short jumps into and out of other spaces going for them. But they were vastly outnumbered in that last great mass attack. Ultimately, all of them fell."

The ship gave a shudder. They turned toward the lock.

"He's cut it loose, whatever it was," MacFarland stated.

"It shouldn't shake the whole ship that way," Wade said.

"It would if it accelerated away the instant it was freed," said Juna.

"But how could it, with all of its control circuits sealed?" Wade asked.

She glanced at the greasy smears on her coveralls.

"I reestablished its circuits when I learned the truth," she told him. "I don't know what percentage of its old efficiency it possesses, but I am certain that it is about to attack the berserker."

The lock cycled open, and Dorphy emerged, began unfastening his suit as it cycled closed behind him.

"We've got to get the hell out of here!" MacFarland cried. "This area is about to become a war zone!"

"You care to do the piloting?" Wade asked him.

"Of course not."

"Then give me my gun and get out of my way." He accepted the weapon and headed for the bridge.

* * *

For so long as the screens permitted resolution, they watched the ponderous movements of the giant berserker, the flashes of its energy blasts, the dartings and sudden disappearances and reappearances of its tiny attacker.

Later, some time after the images were lost, a fireball sprang into being against the starry black.

"He got it! He got it! Qwib-qwib got it!" Dorphy cried.

"And it probably got him, too," MacFarland remarked. "What do you think, Wade?"

"What I think," Wade replied, "is that I will never have anything to do with either of you again."

He rose and left to go and sit with Juna. He took along his recorder and some music. She turned from watching the view on her own screen and smiled weakly as he seated himself beside her bed.

"I'm going to take care of you," he told her, "until you don't need me."

"That would be nice," she said.

* * *

Tracking. Tracking. They were coming. Five of them. The big one must have sent for them. Jump behind them and take out the two rear ones before the others realize what is happening. Another jump, hit the port flank and jump again. They've never seen these tactics. Dodge. Fire. Jump. Jump again. Fire. The last one is spinning like a top, trying to anticipate. Hit it. Charge right in. There.

The last qwibbian-qwibbian-kel in the universe departed the battle scene, seeking the raw materials for some fresh repair work. Then, of course, it would need still more, for the replications. Who hath drawn the circuits for the lion?

A Word from Zelazny

"I'd never thought Fred Saberhagen would allow anyone else to write a berserker story, so I was surprised when he told me he was going to do just that, with *Berserker Base*...would I do one too? Sure, I said. I was flattered, honored even. And it would give me an opportunity to try out an interesting notion I'd come up with on reading *A Hideous History of Weapons*, by Cherney Berg (Crowell-Collier, 1963). In following the development of weaponry from primitive through the sophisticated, I'd noted that weapons and defenses and new weapons really did appear to arise in response to each other with such a chartable predictability that the area might well be viewed as one of the few classic examples of a dialectic doing just what dialectics are supposed to do—thesis, antithesis, synthesis, *ad nauseam*. All I had to do was consider the berserker as the thesis and apply the formula.

"Thanks, Fred; thanks, Cherney; thanks, Hegel."[1] [G. W. F. **Hegel** (1770–1831) was the German philosopher who developed the form of logic called dialectics.]

Notes

Antonín Leopold **Dvořák** was a Czech composer of Romantic music, of which his best known works include his Ninth Symphony "From the New World" and the ***Slavonic Dances***. **Schizophrenia** is a psychiatric disorder characterized by paranoid delusion, hallucinations, and withdrawal; here the term is used more loosely to mean being of two minds about something. **William Faulkner** was an American novelist known for such works as *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Critics often say his writing is dense, meandering, too symbolic, and confusing. American Admiral David Glasgow Farragut said, "**Damn the torpedoes**, full speed ahead!" **Norbert Wiener**, an American mathematician, invented cybernetics, a science covering control theory, automation and feedback systems.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

MANA FROM HEAVEN

Satellite Orbit, The Magazine of Satellite Entertainment and Electronics,
September and October 1983.
§ Larry Niven's *The Magic Goes Away* universe

I felt nothing untoward that afternoon, whereas, I suppose, my senses should have been tingling. It was a balmy, sun-filled day with but the lightest of clouds above the ocean horizon. It might have lulled me within the not unpleasant variations of my routine. It was partly distraction, then, of my subliminal, superliminal perceptions, my early-warning system, whatever... This, I suppose, abetted by the fact that there had been no danger for a long while, and that I was certain I was safely hidden. It was a lovely summer day.

There was a wide window at the rear of my office, affording an oblique view of the ocean. The usual clutter lay about—opened cartons oozing packing material, a variety of tools, heaps of rags, bottles of cleaning compounds, and restoratives for various surfaces. And of course the acquisitions: Some of them still stood in crates and cartons; others held ragged rank upon my workbench, which ran the length of an entire wall—a row of ungainly chessmen awaiting my hand. The window was open and the fan purring so that the fumes from my chemicals could escape rapidly. Bird songs entered, and a sound of distant traffic, sometimes the wind.

My Styrofoam coffee cup rested unopened upon the small table beside the door, its contents long grown cold and unpalatable to any but an oral masochist. I had set it there that morning and forgotten it until my eyes chanced to light upon it. I had worked through coffee break and lunch, the day had been so rewarding. The really important part had been completed, though the rest of the museum staff would never notice. Time now to rest, to celebrate, to savor all I had found.

I raised the cup of cold coffee. Why not? A few words, a simple gesture…

I took a sip of the icy champagne. Wonderful.

I crossed to the telephone then, to call Elaine. This day was worth a bigger celebration than the cup I held. Just as my hand was about to fall upon the instrument, however, the phone rang. Following the startle response, I raised the receiver.

"Hello," I said.

Nothing.

"Hello?"

Nothing again. No…Something.

Not some weirdo dialing at random either, as I am an extension…

"Say it or get off the pot," I said.

The words came controlled, from back in the throat, slow, the voice unidentifiable:

"Phoenix—Phoenix—burning—bright," I heard.

"Why warn me, asshole?"

"Tag. You're—it."

The line went dead.

I pushed the button several times, roused the switchboard.

"Elsie," I asked, "the person who just called me—what were the exact words—"

"Huh?" she said. "I haven't put any calls through to you all day, Dave."

"Oh."

"You okay?"

"Short circuit or something," I said. "Thanks."

I cradled it and tossed off the rest of the champagne. It was no longer a pleasure, merely a housecleaning chore. I fingered the tektite pendant I wore, the roughness of my lava-stone belt buckle, the coral in my watchband. I opened my attaché case and replaced certain items I had been using. I removed a few, also, and dropped them into my pockets.

It didn't make sense, but I knew that it had been for real because of the first words spoken. I thought hard. I still had no answer, after all these years. But I knew that it meant danger. And I knew that it could take any form.

I snapped the case shut. At least it had happened today, rather than, say, yesterday. I was better prepared.

I closed the window and turned off the fan. I wondered whether I should head for my cache. Of course, that could be what someone expected me to do.

I walked up the hall and knocked on my boss's half-open door.

"Come in, Dave. What's up?" he asked.

Mike Thorley, in his late thirties, mustached, well dressed, smiling, put down a sheaf of papers and glanced at a dead pipe in a big ashtray.

"A small complication in my life," I told him. "Is it okay if I punch out early today?"

"Sure. Nothing too serious, I hope?"

I shrugged.

"I hope not, too. If it gets that way, though, I'll probably need a few days."

He moved his lips around a bit, then nodded.

"You'll call in?"

"Of course."

"It's just that I'd like all of that African stuff taken care of pretty soon."

"Right," I said. "Some nice pieces there."

He raised both hands.

"Okay. Do what you have to do."

"Thanks."

I started to turn away. Then, "One thing," I said.

"Yes?"

"Has anybody been asking about me—anything?"

He started to shake his head, then stopped.

"Unless you count that reporter," he said.

"What reporter?"

"The fellow who phoned the other day, doing a piece on our new acquisitions. Your name came up, of course, and he had a few general questions—the usual stuff, like how long you've been with us, where you're from. You know."

"What was his name?"

"Wolfgang or Walford. Something like that."

"What paper?"

"The *Times*."

I nodded.

"Okay. Be seeing you."

"Take care."

I used the pay phone in the lobby to call the paper. No one working there named Wolfgang or Walford or something like that, of course. No article in the works either. I debated calling another paper, just in case Mike was mistaken, when I was distracted by a tap upon the shoulder. I must have turned too quickly, my expression something other than composed, for her smile faded and fear arced across her dark brows, slackened her jaw.

"Elaine!" I said. "You startled me. I didn't expect…"

The smile found its way back.

"You're awfully jumpy, Dave. What are you up to?"

"Checking on my dry cleaning," I said. "You're the last person—"

"I know. Nice of me, isn't it? It was such a beautiful day that I decided to knock off early and remind you we had a sort of date."

My mind spun even as I put my arms about her shoulders and turned her toward the door. How much danger might she be in if I spent a few hours with her in full daylight? I was about to go for something to eat anyway, and I could keep alert for observers. Also, her presence might lull anyone watching me into thinking that I had not taken the call seriously, that perhaps I was not the proper person after all. For that matter, I realized that I wanted some company just then. And if my sudden departure became necessary, I also wanted her company this one last time.

"Yes," I said. "Great idea. Let's take my car."

"Don't you have to sign out or something?"

"I already did. I had the same feeling you did about the day. I was going to call you after I got my cleaning.

"It's not ready yet," I added, and my mind kept turning.

A little trickle here, a little there. I did not feel that we were being observed.

"I know a good little restaurant about forty miles down the coast. Lots of atmosphere. Fine seafood," I said as we descended the front stairs. "And it should be a pleasant drive."

We headed for the museum's parking lot, around to the side.

"I've got a beach cottage near there too," I said.

"You never mentioned that."

"I hardly ever use it."

"Why not? It sounds wonderful."

"It's a little out of the way."

"Then why'd you buy it?"

"I inherited it," I said.

I paused about a hundred feet from my car and jammed a hand into my pocket.

"Watch," I told her.

The engine turned over, the car vibrated.

"How…?" she began.

"A little microwave gizmo. I can start it before I get to it."

"You afraid of a bomb?"

I shook my head.

"It has to warm up. You know how I like gadgets."

Of course I wanted to check out the possibility of a bomb. It was a natural reaction for one in my position. Fortunately, I had convinced her of my fondness for gadgets early in our acquaintanceship—to cover any such contingencies as this. Of course, too, there was no microwave gizmo in my pocket. Just some of the stuff.

We continued forward then; I unlocked the doors and we entered it.

I watched carefully as I drove. Nothing, no one, seemed to be trailing us. "Tag. You're it," though. A gambit. Was I supposed to bolt and run? Was I supposed to try to attack? If so, what? Who?

Was I going to bolt and run?

In the rear of my mind I saw that the bolt-and-run pattern had already started taking shape.

How long, how long, had this been going on? Years. Flight. A new identity. A long spell of almost normal existence. An attack… Flee again. Settle again.

If only I had an idea as to which one of them it was, then I could attack. Not knowing, though, I had to avoid the company of all my fellows—the only ones who could give me clues.

"You look sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, Dave. It can't be your dry cleaning, can it?"

I smiled at her.

"Just business," I said. "All of the things I wanted to get away from. Thanks for reminding me."

I switched on the radio and found some music. Once we got out of city traffic, I began to relax. When we reached the coast road and it thinned even further, it became obvious that we were not being followed. We climbed for a time, then descended. My palms tingled as I spotted the pocket of fog at the bottom of the next dip. Exhilarated, I drank its essence. Then I began talking about the African pieces, in their mundane aspects. We branched off from there. For a time, I forgot my problem. This lasted for perhaps twenty minutes, until the news broadcast. By then I was projecting goodwill, charm, warmth, and kind feelings. I could see that Elaine had begun enjoying herself. There was feedback. I felt even better. There—

"…new eruptions which began this morning," came over the speaker. "The sudden activity on the part of El Chinchonal spurred immediate evacuation of the area about—"

I reached over and turned up the volume, stopping in the middle of my story about hiking in the Alps.

"What—?" she said.

I raised a finger to my lips.

"The volcano," I explained.

"What of it?"

"They fascinate me," I said.

"Oh."

As I memorized all of the facts about the eruption, I began to build feelings concerning my situation. My having received the call today had been a matter of timing…

"There were some good pictures of it on the tube this morning," she said as the newsbrief ended.

"I wasn't watching. But I've seen it do it before, when I was down there."

"You visit volcanos?"

"When they're active, yes."

"Here you have this really oddball hobby and you've never mentioned it," she observed. "How many active volcanos have you visited?"

"Most of them," I said, no longer listening, the lines of the challenge becoming visible—the first time it had ever been put on this basis. I realized in that instant that this time I was not going to run.

"Most of them?" she said. "I read somewhere that there are hundreds, some of them in really out-of-the-way places. Like Erebus—"

"I've been in Erebus," I said, "back when—" And then I realized what I was saying. "—back in some dream," I finished. "Little joke there."

I laughed, but she only smiled a bit.

It didn't matter, though. She couldn't hurt me. Very few mundanes could. I was just about finished with her anyway. After tonight I would forget her. We would never meet again. I am by nature polite, though; it is a thing I value above sentiment. I would not hurt her either: It might be easiest simply to make her forget.

"Seriously, I do find certain aspects of geophysics fascinating."

"I've been an amateur astronomer for some time," she volunteered. "I can understand."

"Really? Astronomy? You never told me."

"Well?" she said.

I began to work it out, small talk flowing reflexively. After we parted tonight or tomorrow morning, I would leave. I would go to

Villahermosa. My enemy would be waiting—of this I felt certain. "Tag. You're it." "This is your chance. Come and get me if you're not afraid."

Of course, I was afraid.

But I'd run for too long. I would have to go, to settle this for good. Who knew when I'd have another opportunity? I had reached the point where it was worth any risk to find out who it was, to have a chance to retaliate. I would take care of all the preliminaries later, at the cottage, after she was asleep. Yes.

"You've got beach?" she asked.

"Yes."

"How isolated?"

"Very. Why?"

"It would be nice to swim before dinner."

So we stopped by the restaurant, made reservations for later, and went off and did that. The water was fine.

❖ ❖ ❖

The day turned into a fine evening. I'd gotten us my favorite table, on the patio, out back, sequestered by colorful shrubbery, touched by flower scents, in the view of mountains. The breezes came just right. So did the lobster and champagne. Within the restaurant, a pleasant music stirred softly. During coffee, I found her hand beneath my own. I smiled. She smiled back.

Then, "How'd you do it, Dave?" she asked.

"What?"

"Hypnotize me."

"Native charm, I guess," I replied, laughing.

"That is not what I mean."

"What, then?" I said, all chuckles fled.

"You haven't even noticed that I'm not smoking anymore."

"Hey, you're right! Congratulations. How long's it been?"

"A couple of weeks," she replied. "I've been seeing a hypnotist."

"Oh, really?"

"Mm-hm. I was such a docile subject that he couldn't believe I'd never been under before. So he poked around a little, and he came up with a description of you, telling me to forget something."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You want to know what I remember now that I didn't before?"

"Tell me."

"An almost-accident, late one night, about a month ago. The other car didn't even slow down for the stop sign. Yours levitated. Then I remember us parked by the side of the road, and you were telling me to forget. I did."

I snorted.

"Any hypnotist with much experience will tell you that a trance state is no guarantee against fantasy—and a hallucination recalled under hypnosis seems just as real the second time around. Either way—"

"I remember the *ping* as the car's antenna struck your right rear fender and snapped off."

"They can be vivid fantasies too."

"I looked, Dave. The mark is there on the fender. It looks just as if someone had swatted it with an antenna."

Damn! I'd meant to get that filled in and touched up. Hadn't gotten around to it, though.

"I got that in a parking lot," I said.

"Come on, Dave."

Should I put her under now and make her forget having remembered? I wondered. Maybe that would be easiest.

"I don't care," she said then. "Look, I really don't care. Strange things sometimes happen. If you're connected with some of them, that's okay. What bothers me is that it means you don't trust me…"

Trust? That is something that positions you as a target. Like Proteus, when Amazon and Priest got finished with him. Not that he didn't have it coming…

"…and I've trusted you for a long time."

I removed my hand from hers. I took a drink of coffee. Not here. I'd give her mind a little twist later. Implant something to make her stay away from hypnotists in the future too.

"Okay," I said. "I guess you're right. But it's a long story. I'll tell you after we get back to the cottage."

Her hand found my own, and I met her eyes.

"Thanks," she said.

* * *

We drove back beneath a moonless sky clotted with stars. It was an unpaved road, dipping, rising, twisting amid heavy shrubbery. Insect noises came in through our open windows, along with the salt smell of the sea. For a moment, just for a moment, I thought that I felt a strange tingling, but it could have been the night and the champagne. And it did not come again.

Later, we pulled up in front of the place, parked, and got out. Silently, I deactivated my invisible warden. We advanced, I unlocked the door, I turned on the light.

"You never have any trouble here, huh?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"People breaking in, messing the place up, ripping you off."

"No," I answered.

"Why not?"

"Lucky, I guess."

"Really?"

"Well…it's protected, in a very special way. That's a part of the story too. Wait till I get some coffee going."

I went out to the kitchen, rinsed out the pot, put things together, and set it over a flame. I moved to open a window, to catch a little breeze.

Suddenly, my shadow was intense upon the wall.

I spun about.

The flame had departed the stove, hovered in the air and begun to grow. Elaine screamed just as I turned, and the thing swelled to fill the room. I saw that it bore the shifting features of a fire elemental, just before it burst apart to swirl tornadolike through the cottage. In a moment, the place was blazing and I heard its crackling laughter.

"Elaine!" I called, rushing forward, for I had seen her transformed into a torch.

All of the objects in my pockets plus my belt buckle, I calculated quickly, probably represented a sufficient accumulation of power to banish the thing. Of course the energies were invested, tied up, waiting to be used in different ways. I spoke the words that would rape the power-objects and free the forces. Then I performed the banishment.

The flames were gone in an instant. But not the smoke, not the smell.

…And Elaine lay there sobbing, clothing and flesh charred, limbs jerking convulsively. All of her exposed areas were dark and scaly, and blood was beginning to ooze from the cracks in her flesh.

I cursed as I reset the warden. I had created it to protect the place in my absence. I had never bothered to use it once I was inside. I should have.

Whoever had done this was still probably near. My cache was located in a vault about twenty feet beneath the cottage—near enough for me to use a number of the power things without even going after them. I could draw out their mana as I just had with those about my person. I could use it against my enemy. Yes. This was the chance I had been waiting for.

I rushed to my attaché case and opened it. I would need power to reach the power and manipulate it. And the mana from the artifacts I had drained was tied up in my own devices. I reached for the rod and the sphere. At last, my enemy, you've had it! You should have known better than to attack me here!

Elaine moaned...

I cursed myself for a weakling. If my enemy were testing me to see whether I had grown soft, he would have his answer in the affirmative. She was no stranger, and she had said that she trusted me. I had to do it. I began the spell that would drain most of my power-objects to work her healing.

It took most of an hour. I put her to sleep. I stopped the bleeding. I watched new tissues form. I bathed her and dressed her in a sport shirt and rolled-up pair of slacks from the bedroom closet, a place the flames had not reached. I left her sleeping a little longer then while I cleaned up, opened the windows and got on with making the coffee.

At last, I stood beside the old chair—now covered with a blanket—into which I had placed her. If I had just done something decent and noble, why did I feel so stupid about it? Probably because it was out of character. I was reassured, at least, that I had not been totally corrupted to virtue by reason of my feeling resentment at having to use all of that mana on her behalf.

Well...Put a good face on it now the deed was done.

How?

Good question. I could proceed to erase her memories of the event and implant some substitute story—a gas leak, perhaps—as to what had occurred, along with the suggestion that she accept it. I could do that. Probably the easiest course for me.

My resentment suddenly faded, to be replaced by something else, as I realized that I did not want to do it that way. What I did want was an end to my loneliness. She trusted me. I felt that I could trust her. I wanted someone I could really talk with.

When she opened her eyes, I put a cup of coffee into her hands.

"Cheerio," I said.

She stared at me, then turned her head slowly and regarded the still-visible ravages about the room. Her hands began to shake. But she put the cup down herself, on the small side table, rather than letting me take it back. She examined her hands and arms. She felt her face.

"You're all right," I said.

"How?" she asked.

"That's the story," I said. "You've got it coming."

"What was that thing?"

"That's a part of it."

"Okay," she said then, raising the cup more steadily and taking a sip. "Let's hear it."

"Well, I'm a sorcerer," I said, "a direct descendant of the ancient sorcerers of Atlantis."

I paused. I waited for the sigh or the rejoinder. There was none.

"I learned the business from my parents," I went on, "a long time ago. The basis of the whole thing is mana, a kind of energy found in various things and places. Once the world was lousy with it. It was the basis of an entire culture. But it was like other natural resources. One day it ran out. Then the magic went away. Most of it. Atlantis sank. The creatures of magic faded, died. The structure of the world itself was altered, causing it to appear much older than it really is. The old gods passed. The sorcerers, the ones who manipulated the mana to produce magic, were pretty much out of business. There followed the real dark ages, before the beginnings of civilization as we know it from the history books."

"This mighty civilization left no record of itself?" she asked.

"With the passing of the magic, there were transformations. The record was rewritten into natural-seeming stone and fossil-bed, was dissipated, underwent a sea change."

"Granting all that for a moment," she said, sipping the coffee, "if the power is gone, if there's nothing left to do it with, how can you be a sorcerer?"

"Well, it's not *all* gone," I said. "There are small surviving sources, there are some new sources, and—"

"—and you fight over them? Those of you who remain?"

"No…not exactly," I said. "You see, there are not that many of us. We intentionally keep our numbers small, so that no one goes hungry."

" 'Hungry'?"

"A figure of speech we use. Meaning to get enough mana to keep body and soul together, to stave off aging, keep healthy and enjoy the good things."

"You can rejuvenate yourselves with it? How old are you?"

"Don't ask embarrassing questions. If my spells ran out and there was no more mana, I'd go fast. But we can trap the stuff, lock it up, hold it, whenever we come across a power-source. It can be stored in certain objects—or, better yet, tied up in partial spells, like dialing all but the final digit in a phone number. The spells that maintain one's existence always get primary consideration."

She smiled.

"You must have used a lot of it on me."

I looked away.

"Yes," I said.

"So you couldn't just drop out and be a normal person and continue to live?"

"No."

"So what was that thing?" she asked. "What happened here?"

"An enemy attacked me. We survived."

She took a big gulp of the coffee and leaned back and closed her eyes.

Then, "Will it happen again?" she asked.

"Probably. If I let it."

"What do you mean?"

"This was more of a challenge than an all-out attack. My enemy is finally getting tired of playing games and wants to finish things off."

"And you are going to accept the challenge?"

"I have no choice. Unless you'd consider waiting around for something like this to happen again, with more finality."

She shuddered slightly.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I've a feeling I may be too," she stated, finishing her coffee and rising, crossing to the window, looking out, "before this is over.

"What do we do next?" she asked, turning and staring at me.

"I'm going to take you to a safe place and go away," I said, "for a time." It seemed a decent thing to add those last words, though I doubted I would ever see her again.

"The hell you are," she said.

"Huh? What do you mean? You want to be safe, don't you?"

"If your enemy thinks I mean something to you, I'm vulnerable—the way I see it," she told me.

"Maybe…"

The answer, of course, was to put her into a week-long trance and secure her down in the vault, with strong wards and the door openable from the inside. Since my magic had not all gone away, I raised one hand and sought her eyes with my own.

What tipped her off, I'm not certain. She looked away, though, and suddenly lunged for the bookcase. When she turned again, she held an old bone flute that had long lain there.

I restrained myself in mid-mutter. It was a power-object that she held, one of several lying about the room, and one of the few that had not been drained during my recent workings. I couldn't really think of much that a nonsorcerer could do with it, but my curiosity restrained me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But I'm not going to let you put me away with one of your spells."

"Who said anything about doing that?"

"I can tell."

"How?"

"Just a feeling."

"Well, damn it, you're right. We've been together too long. You can psych me. Okay, put it down and I won't do anything to you."

"Is that a promise, Dave?"

"Yeah. I guess it is."

"I suppose you could rat on it and erase my memory."

"I keep my promises."

"Okay." She put it back on the shelf. "What are we going to do now?"

"I'd still like to put you someplace safe."

"No way."

I sighed.

"I have to go where that volcano is blowing."

"Buy two tickets," she said.

❖ ❖ ❖

It wasn't really necessary. I have my own plane and I'm licensed to fly the thing. In fact, I have several located in different parts of the world. Boats, too.

"There is mana in clouds and in fogbanks," I explained to her. "In a real pinch, I use my vehicles to go chasing after them."

We moved slowly through the clouds. I had detoured a good distance, but it was necessary. Even after we had driven up to my apartment and collected everything I'd had on hand, I was still too mana-impoverished for the necessary initial shielding and a few strikes. I needed to collect a little more for this. After that it wouldn't matter, the way I saw things. My enemy and I would be plugged into the same source. All we had to do was reach it.

So I circled in the fog for a long while, collecting. It was a protection spell into which I concentrated the mana.

"What happens when it's all gone?" she asked, as I banked and climbed for a final pass before continuing to the southeast.

"What?" I said.

"The mana. Will you all fade away?"

I chuckled.

"It can't," I said. "Not with so few of us using it. How many tons of meteoric material do you think have fallen to earth today? They raise the background level almost imperceptibly—constantly. And much of it falls into the oceans. The beaches are thereby enriched. That's why I like to be near the sea. Mist-shrouded mountaintops gradually accumulate it. They're good places for collecting too. And new clouds are always forming. Our grand plan is more than simple survival. We're waiting for the day when it reaches a level where it will react and establish fields over large areas. Then we won't have to rely on accumulators and partial spells for its containment. The magic will be available everywhere again."

"Then you will exhaust it all and be back where you started again."

"Maybe," I said. "If we've learned nothing, that may be the case. We'll enter a new golden age, become dependent upon it, forget our other skills, exhaust it again and head for another dark age. Unless…"

"Unless what?"

"Unless those of us who have been living with it have also learned something. We'd need to figure the rate of mana exhaustion and budget ourselves. We'd need to preserve technology for things on which mana had been used the last time around. Our experience in this century with physical resources may be useful. Also, there is the hope that some areas of space may be richer in cosmic dust or possess some other factor that will increase the accumulation. Then, too, we are waiting for the full development of the space program—to reach other worlds rich in what we need."

"Sounds as if you have it all worked out."

"We've had a lot of time to think about it."

"But what would be your relationship with those of us who are not versed in magic?"

"Beneficent. We all stand to benefit that way."

"Are you speaking for yourself or for the lot of you?"

"Well, most of the others must feel the same way. I just want to putter around museums…"

"You said that you had been out of touch with the others for some time."

"Yes, but—"

She shook her head and turned to look out at the fog.

"Something else to worry about," she said.

* * *

I couldn't get a landing clearance, so I just found a flat place and put it down and left it. I could deal later with any problems this caused.

I unstowed our gear; we hefted it and began walking toward that ragged, smoky quarter of the horizon.

"We'll never reach it on foot," she said.

"You're right," I answered. "I wasn't planning to, though. When the time is right, something else will present itself."

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see."

We hiked for several miles, encountering no one. The way was warm and dusty, with occasional tremors of the earth. Shortly, I felt the rush of mana, and I drew upon it.

"Take my hand," I said.

I spoke the words necessary to levitate us a few feet above the rocky terrain. We glided forward then, and the power about us increased as we advanced upon our goal. I worked with more of it, spelling to increase our pace, to work protective shields around us, guarding us from the heat, from flying debris.

The sky grew darker, from ash, from smoke, long before we commenced the ascent. The rise was gradual at first but steepened steadily as we raced onward. I worked a variety of partial spells, offensive and defensive, tying up quantities of mana just a word, just a fingertip gesture away.

"Reach out, reach out and touch someone," I hummed as the visible world came and went with the passage of roiling clouds.

We sped into a belt where we would probably have been asphyxiated but for the shield. The noises had grown louder by then. It must have been pretty hot out there too. When we finally reached the rim, dark shapes fled upward past us and lightning stalked the clouds. Forward and below, a glowing, seething mass shifted constantly amid explosions.

"All right!" I shouted. "I'm going to charge up everything I brought with me and tie up some more mana in a whole library of spells! Make yourself comfortable!"

"Yeah," she said, licking her lips and staring downward. "I'll do that. But what about your enemy?"

"Haven't seen anybody so far—and there's too much free mana around for me to pick up vibes. I'm going to keep an eye peeled and take advantage of the situation. You watch too."

"Right," she said. "This is perfectly safe, huh?"

"As safe as L.A. traffic."

"Great. Real comforting," she observed as a huge rocky mass flew past us.

We separated later. I left her within her own protective spell, leaning against a craggy prominence, and I moved off to the right to perform a ritual that required greater freedom of movement.

Then a shower of sparks rose into the air before me. Nothing especially untoward about that, until I realized that it was hovering for an unusually long while. After a time, it seemed that it should have begun dispersing…

"Phoenix, Phoenix, burning bright!" The words boomed about me, rising above the noises of the inferno itself.

"Who calls me?" I asked.

"Who has the strongest reason to do you harm?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't ask."

"Then seek the answer in hell!"

A wall of flame rushed toward me. I spoke the words that strengthened my shield. Even so, I was rocked within my protective bubble when it hit. Striking back was going to be tricky, I could see, with my enemy in a less-than-material form.

"All right, to the death!" I cried, calling for a lightning stroke through the space where the sparks spun.

I turned away and covered my eyes against the brilliance, but I still felt its presence through my skin.

My bubble of forces continued to rock as I blinked and looked forward. The air before me had momentarily cleared, but everything seemed somehow darker, and—

A being—a crudely man-shaped form of semisolid lava—had wrapped its arms as far as they would go about me and was squeezing. My spell held, but I was raised above the crater's rim.

"It won't work!" I said, trying to dissolve the being.

"The hell you say!" came a voice from high overhead.

I learned quickly that the lava-thing was protected against the simple workings I threw at it. All right, then hurl me down. I would levitate out. The Phoenix would rise again. I—

I passed over the rim and was falling. But there was a problem. A heavy one.

The molten creature was clinging to my force-bubble. Magic is magic and science is science, but there are correspondences. The more mass you want to move, the more mana you have to expend. So, taken off guard, I was dropping into the fiery pit despite a levitation spell that would have borne me on high in a less encumbered state. I immediately began a spell to provide me with additional buoyancy.

But when I had finished, I saw that something was countering me—another spell, a spell that kept increasing the mass of my creature-burden by absorption as we fell. Save for an area between my feet through which I saw the roiling lake of fire, I was enclosed by the flowing mass of the thing. I could think of only one possible escape, and I didn't know whether I had time for it.

I began the spell that would transform me into a spark-filled vortex similar to that my confronter had worn. When I achieved it, I released my protective spell and flowed.

Out through the nether opening then, so close to that bubbling surface I would have panicked had not my mind itself been altered by the transformation, into something static and poised.

Skimming the heat-distorted surface of the lava, I swarmed past the heavily weighted being of animated rock and was already rising at a rapid rate, buffeted, borne aloft by heat waves, when it hit a rising swell and was gone. I added my own energy to the rising and fled upward, through alleys of smoke and steam, past flashes of lava bullets.

I laid the bird-shape upon my glowing swirls, I sucked in mana, I issued a long, drawn-out rising scream. I spread my wings along expanding lines of energy, seeking my swirling adversary as I reached the rim.

Nothing. I darted back and forth, I circled. He/she/it was nowhere in sight.

"I am here!" I cried. "Face me now!"

But there was no reply, save for the catastrophe beneath me from which fresh explosions issued.

"Come!" I cried. "I am waiting!"

So I sought Elaine, but she was not where I had left her. My enemy had either destroyed her or taken her away.

I cursed then like thunder and spun myself into a large vortex, a rising tower of lights. I drove myself upward then, leaving the earth and that burning pimple far beneath me.

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For how long I rode the jet streams, raging, I cannot say. I know that I circled the world several times before any semblance of rational thinking returned to me, before I calmed sufficiently to formulate anything resembling a plan.

It was obviously one of my fellows who had tried to kill me, who had taken Elaine from me. I had avoided contact with my own kind for too long. Now I knew that I must seek them out, whatever the risk, to obtain the knowledge I needed for self-preservation, for revenge.

I began my downward drift as I neared the Middle East. Arabia. Yes. Oil fields, places of rich, expensive pollutants, gushing mana-filled from the earth. Home of the one called Dervish.

Retaining my Phoenix-form, I fled from field to field, beelike, tasting, using the power to reinforce the spell under which I was operating. Seeking…

For three days I sought, sweeping across bleak landscapes, visiting field after field. It was like a series of smorgasbords. It would be so easy to use the mana to transform the countryside. But of course that would be a giveaway, in many respects.

Then, gliding in low over shimmering sands as evening mounted in the East, I realized that this was the one I was seeking. There was no physical distinction to the oil field I approached and then cruised. But it stood in the realm of my sensitivity as if a sign had been posted. The mana level was much lower than at any of the others I had scanned. And where this was the case, one of us had to be operating.

I spread myself into even more tenuous patterns. I sought altitude. I began circling.

Yes, there was a pattern. It became clearer as I studied the area. The low-mana section described a rough circle near the northwest corner of the field, its center near a range of hills.

He could be working in some official capacity there at the field. If so, his duties would be minimal and the job would be a cover. He always had been pretty lazy.

I spiraled in and dropped toward the center of the circle as toward the eye of a target. As I rushed to it, I became aware of the small, crumbling adobe structure that occupied that area, blending almost perfectly with its surroundings. A maintenance or storage house, a watchman's quarters… It did not matter what it seemed to be. I knew what it had to be.

I dived to a landing before it. I reversed my spell, taking on human form once again. I pushed open the weather-worn, unlatched door and walked inside.

The place was empty, save for a few sticks of beaten furniture and a lot of dust. I swore softly. This had to be it.

I walked slowly about the room, looking for some clue.

It was nothing that I saw, or even felt, at first. It was memory—of an obscure variant of an old spell, and of Dervish's character—that led me to turn and step back outside.

I closed the door. I felt around for the proper words. It was hard to remember exactly how this one would go. Finally, they came flowing forth and I could feel them falling into place, mortise and tenon, key and lock. Yes, there was a response. The subtle back-pressure was there.

I had been right.

When I had finished, I knew that things were different.

I reached toward the door, then hesitated. I had probably tripped some alarm. Best to have a couple of spells at my fingertips, awaiting merely guide-words. I muttered them into readiness, then opened the door.

A marble stairway as wide as the building itself led downward, creamy jewels gleaming like hundred-watt bulbs high at either hand.

I moved forward, began the descent. Odors of jasmine, saffron, and sandalwood came to me. As I continued, I heard the sounds of stringed instruments and a flute in the distance. By then I could see part of a tiled floor below and ahead—and a portion of an elaborate design upon it. I laid a spell of invisibility over myself and kept going.

Before I reached the bottom, I saw him, across the long, pillared hall.

He was at the far end, reclined in a nest of cushions and bright patterned rugs. An elaborate repast was spread before him. A narghile bubbled at his side. A young woman was doing a belly dance nearby.

I halted at the foot of the stair and studied the layout. Archways to both the right and the left appeared to lead off to other chambers. Behind him was a pair of wide windows, looking upon high mountain peaks beneath very blue skies—representing either a very good illusion or the expenditure of a lot of mana on a powerful space-bridging spell. Of course, he had a lot of mana to play around with. Still, it seemed kind of wasteful.

I studied the man himself. His appearance was pretty much unchanged—sharp-featured, dark-skinned, tall, husky running to fat.

I advanced slowly, the keys to half a dozen spells ready for utterance or gesture.

When I was about thirty feet away, he stirred uneasily. Then he kept glancing in my direction. His power-sense was still apparently in good shape.

So I spoke two words, one of which put a less-than-material but very potent magical dart into my hand, the other casting aside my veil of invisibility.

"Phoenix!" he exclaimed, sitting upright and staring. "I thought you were dead!"

I smiled.

"How recently did that thought pass through your mind?" I asked him.

"I'm afraid I don't understand…"

"One of us just tried to kill me, down in Mexico."

He shook his head.

"I haven't been in that part of the world for some time."

"Prove it," I said.

"I can't," he replied. "You know that my people here would say whatever I want them to—so that's no help. I didn't do it, but I can't think of any way to prove it. That's the trouble with trying to demonstrate a negative. Why do you suspect me, anyway?"

I sighed.

"That's just it. I don't—or, rather, I have to suspect everyone. I just chose you at random. I'm going down the list."

"Then at least I have statistics on my side."

"I suppose you're right, damn it."

He rose, turned his palms upward.

"We've never been particularly close," he said. "But then, we've never been enemies either. I have no reason at all for wishing you harm."

He eyed the dart in my hand. He raised his right hand, still holding a bottle.

"So you intend to do us all in by way of insurance?"

"No, I was hoping that you would attack me and thereby prove your guilt. It would have made life easier."

I sent the dart away as a sign of good faith.

"I believe you," I said.

He leaned and placed the bottle he held upon a cushion.

"Had you slain me, that bottle would have fallen and broken," he said. "Or perhaps I could have beaten you on an attack and drawn the cork. It contains an attack djinn."

"Neat trick."

"Come join me for dinner," he suggested. "I want to hear your story. One who would attack you for no reason might well attack me one day."

"All right," I said.

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The dancer had been dismissed. The meal was finished. We sipped coffee. I had spoken without interruption for nearly an hour. I was tired, but I had a spell for that.

"More than a little strange," he said at length. "And you have no recollection, from back when all of this started, of having hurt, insulted or cheated any of the others?"

"No."

I sipped my coffee.

"So it could be any of them," I said after a time. "Priest, Amazon, Gnome, Siren, Werewolf, Lamia, Lady, Sprite, Cowboy…"

"Well, scratch Lamia," he said. "I believe she's dead."

"How?"

He shrugged, looked away.

"Not sure," he said slowly. Then, "Well, the talk at first was that you and she had run off together. Then, later, it seemed to be that you'd died together…somehow."

"Lamia and me? That's silly. There was never anything between us."

He nodded.

"Then it looks now as if something simply happened to her."

"Talk…" I said. "Who was doing the talking?"

"You know. Stories just get started. You never know exactly where they come from."

"Where'd you first hear it?"

He lowered his eyelids, stared off into the distance.

"Gnome. Yes. It was Gnome mentioned the matter to me at Starfall that year."

"Did he say where he'd heard it?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Okay," I said. "I guess I'll have to go talk to Gnome. He still in South Africa?"

He shook his head, refilled my cup from the tall, elegantly incised pot.

"Cornwall," he said. "Still a lot of juice down those old shafts."

I shuddered slightly.

"He can have it. I get claustrophobia just thinking about it. But if he can tell me who—"

"There is no enemy like a former friend," Dervish said. "If you dropped your friends as well as everyone else when you went into hiding, it means you've already considered that…"

"Yes, as much as I disliked the notion. I rationalized it by saying that I didn't want to expose them to danger, but—"

"Exactly."

"Cowboy and Werewolf were buddies of mine…"

"…And you had a thing going with Siren for a long while, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"A woman scorned?"

"Hardly. We parted amicably."

He shook his head and raised his cup.

"I've exhausted my thinking on the matter."

We finished our coffee. I rose then.

"Well, thanks. I guess I'd better be going. Glad I came to you first."

He raised the bottle.

"Want to take the djinn along?"

"I don't even know how to use one."

"The commands are simple. All the work's already been done."

"Okay. Why not?"

He instructed me briefly, and I took my leave. Soaring above the great oil field, I looked back upon the tiny, ruined building. Then I moved my wings and rose to suck the juice from a cloud before turning west.

❖ ❖ ❖

Starfall, I mused, as earth and water unrolled like a scroll beneath me. Starfall—the big August meteor shower accompanied by the wave of mana called Starwind, the one time of year we all got together. Yes, that was when gossip was exchanged. It had been only a week after a Starfall that I had first been attacked, almost slain, had gone to ground… By the following year the stories were circulating. Had it been something at that earlier Starfall—something I had said or done to someone—that had made me an enemy with that finality of purpose, that quickness of retaliation?

I tried hard to recall what had occurred at that last Starfall I had attended. It had been the heaviest rush of Starwind in memory. I remembered that. "Mana from heaven," Priest had joked. Everyone had been in a good mood. We had talked shop, swapped a few spells, wondered what the heightened Starwind portended, argued politics—all of the usual things. That business Elaine talked about had come up…

Elaine… Alive now? I wondered. Someone's prisoner? Someone's insurance in case I did exactly what I was doing? Or were her ashes long since scattered about the globe? Either way, someone would pay.

I voiced my shrill cry against the rushing winds. It was fled in an instant, echoless. I caught up with the night, passed into its canyons. The stars came on again, grew bright.

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The detailed instructions Dervish had given me proved exactly accurate. There was a mineshaft at the point he had indicated on a map hastily sketched in fiery lines upon the floor. There was no way I would enter the thing in human form, though. A version of my Phoenix-aspect would at least defend me against claustrophobia. I cannot feel completely pent when I am not totally material.

Shrinking, shrinking, as I descended. I called in my tenuous wings and tail, gaining solidity as I grew smaller. Then I bled off mass-energy, retaining my new dimensions, growing ethereal again.

Like a ghost-bird, I entered the adit, dropping, dropping. The place was dead. There was no mana anywhere about me. This, of course, was to be expected. The upper levels would have been the first to be exhausted.

I continued to drop into dampness and darkness for a long while before I felt the first faint touch of the power. It increased only slowly as I moved, but it did begin to rise.

Finally, it began to fall off again and I retraced my route. Yes, that side passage…its source. I entered and followed.

As I worked my way farther and farther, back and down, it continued to increase in intensity. I wondered briefly whether I should be seeking the weaker area or the stronger. But this was not the same sort of setup as Dervish enjoyed. Dervish's power-source was renewable, so he could remain stationary. Gnome would have to move on once he had exhausted a local mana supply.

I spun around a corner into a side tunnel and was halted. Frozen. Damn.

It was a web of forces holding me like a butterfly. I ceased struggling almost immediately, seeing that it was fruitless in this aspect.

I transformed myself back into human form. But the damned web merely shifted to accommodate the alteration and continued to hold me tightly.

I tried a fire spell, to no avail. I tried sucking the mana loose from the web's own spell, but all I got was a headache. It's a dangerous measure, only effective against sloppy workmanship—and then you get hit with a backlash of forces when it comes loose. The spell held perfectly against my effort, however. I had had to try it, though, because I was feeling desperate, with a touch of claustrophobia tossed in. Also, I thought I'd heard a stone rattle farther up the tunnel.

Next I heard a chuckle, and I recognized the voice as Gnome's.

Then a light rounded a corner, followed by a vaguely human form.

The light drifted in front of him and just off to his left—a globe, casting an orange illumination—touching his hunched, twisted shape with a flamelike glow as he limped toward me. He chuckled again.

"Looks as if I've snared a Phoenix," he finally said.

"Very funny. How about unsnaring me now?" I asked.

"Of course, of course," he muttered, already beginning to gesture.

The trap fell apart. I stepped forward.

"I've been asking around," I told him. "What's this story about Lamia and me?"

He continued his gesturing. I was about to invoke an assault or shielding spell when he stopped, though. I felt none the worse and I assumed it was a final cleanup of his web.

"Lamia? You?" he said. "Oh. Yes. I'd heard you'd run off together. Yes. That was it."

"Where'd you hear it?"

He fixed me with his large, pale eyes.

"Where'd you hear it?" I repeated.

"I don't remember."

"Try."

"Sorry."

"'Sorry' hell!" I said, taking a step forward. "Somebody's been trying to kill me and—"

He spoke the word that froze me in mid-step. Good spell, that.

"—and he's been regrettably inept," Gnome finished.

"Let me go, damn it!" I said.

"You came into my home and assaulted me."

"Okay, I apologize. Now—"

"Come this way."

He turned his back on me and began walking. Against my will, my body made the necessary movements. I followed.

I opened my mouth to speak a spell of my own. No words came out. I wanted to make a gesture. I was unable to begin it.

"Where are you taking me?" I tried.

The words came perfectly clear. But he didn't bother answering me for a time. The light moved over glistening seams of some metallic material within the sweating walls.

Then, "To a waiting place," he finally said, turning into a corridor to the right, where we splashed through puddles for a time.

"Why?" I asked him. "What are we waiting for?"

He chuckled again. The light danced. He did not reply.

We walked for several minutes. I began finding the thought of all those tons of rock and earth above me very oppressive. A trapped feeling came over me. But I could not even panic properly within the confines of that spell. I began to perspire profusely, despite a cooling draft from ahead.

Then Gnome turned suddenly and was gone, sidling into a narrow cleft I would not even have noticed had I been coming this way alone.

"Come," I heard him say.

My feet followed the light, moved to drift between us here. Automatically, I turned my body. I sidled after him for a good distance before the way widened. The ground dropped roughly, abruptly, and the walls retracted and the light shot on ahead, gaining altitude.

Gnome raised a broad hand and halted me. We were in a small, irregularly shaped chamber—natural, I guessed. The weak light filled it. I looked about. I had no idea why we had stopped here. Gnome's hand moved and he pointed.

I followed the gesture but still could not tell what it was that he was trying to indicate. The light drifted forward then, hovered near a shelflike niche.

Angles altered, shadows shifted. I saw it.

It was a statue of a reclining woman, carved out of coal.

I moved a step nearer. It was extremely well executed and very familiar.

"I didn't know you were an artist..." I began, and the realization struck me even as he laughed.

"It is *our* art," he said. "Not the mundane kind."

I had reached forward to touch the dark cheek. I dropped my hand, deciding against it.

"It's Lamia, isn't it?" I asked. "It's really her..."

"Of course."

"Why?"

"She has to be someplace, doesn't she?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

He chuckled again.

"You're a dead man, Phoenix, and she's the reason. I never thought I'd have the good fortune to have you walk in this way. But now that you have, all of my problems are over. You will rest a few corridors away from here, in a chamber totally devoid of mana. You will wait, while I send for Werewolf to come and kill you. He was in love with Lamia, you know. He is convinced that you ran off with her. Some friend you are. I've been waiting for him to get you for some time now, but either he's clumsy or you're lucky. Perhaps both."

"So it's been Werewolf all along."

"Yes."

"Why? Why do you want him to kill me?"

"It would look badly if I did it myself. I'll be sure that some of the others are here when it happens. To keep my name clean. In fact, I'll dispatch Werewolf personally as soon as he's finished with you. A perfect final touch."

"Whatever I've done to you, I'm willing to set it right."

Gnome shook his head.

"What you did was to set up an irreducible conflict between us," he said. "There is no way to set it right."

"Would you mind telling me what it is that I did?" I asked.

He made a gesture, and I felt a compulsion to turn and make my way back toward the corridor. He followed, both of us preceded by his light.

As we moved, he asked me, "Were you aware that at each Starfall ceremony for the past ten or twelve years the mana content of the Starwind has been a bit higher?"

"It was ten or twelve years ago that I stopped attending them," I answered. "I recall that it was very high that year. Since then, when I've thought to check at the proper time, it has seemed high, yes."

"The general feeling is that the increase will continue. We seem to be entering a new area of space, richer in the stuff."

"That's great," I said, coming into the corridor again. "But what's that got to do with your wanting me out of the way, with your kidnapping Lamia and turning her to coal, with your siccing Werewolf on me?"

"Everything," he said, conducting me down a slanting shaft where the mana diminished with every step. "Even before that, those of us who had been doing careful studies had found indications that the background level of mana is rising."

"So you decided to kill me?"

He led me to a jagged opening in the wall and indicated that I should enter there. I had no choice. My body obeyed him. The light remained outside with him.

"Yes," he said then, motioning me to the rear of the place. "Years ago it would not have mattered—everyone was entitled to any sort of opinion they felt like holding. But now it does. The magic is beginning to return, you fool. I am going to be around long enough to see it happen, to take advantage of it. I could have put up with your democratic sentiments when such a thing seemed only a daydream—"

And then I remembered our argument, on the same matter Elaine had brought up during our ride down the coast.

"—but knowing what I knew and seeing how strongly you felt, I saw you as one who would oppose our inevitable leadership in that new world. Werewolf was another. That is why I set it up for him to destroy you, to be destroyed in return by myself."

"Do all of the others feel as you do?" I asked.

"No, only a few—just as there were only a few like you, Cowboy and the Wolf. The rest will follow whoever takes the lead, as people always do."

"Who are the others?"

He snorted.

"None of your business now," he said.

He began a familiar gesture and muttered something. I felt free of whatever compulsion he had laid upon me, and I lunged forward. The entrance had not changed its appearance, but I slammed up against something—as if the way were blocked by an invisible door.

"I'll see you at the party," he said, inches away, beyond my reach. "In the meantime, try to get some rest."

I felt my consciousness ebbing. I managed to lean and cover my face with my arms before I lost all control. I do not remember hitting the floor.

* * *

How long I lay entranced I do not know. Long enough for some of the others to respond to an invitation, it would seem. Whatever reason he gave them for a party, it was sufficient to bring Knight, Druid, Amazon, Priest, Siren, and Snowman to a large hall somewhere beneath the Cornish hills. I became aware of this by suddenly returning to full consciousness at the end of a long, black corridor without pictures. I pushed myself into a seated position, rubbed my eyes and squinted, trying to penetrate my cell's gloom. Moments later, this was taken care of for me. So I knew that my awakening and the happening that followed were of one piece.

The lighting problem was taken care of for me by the wall's beginning to glow, turning glassy, then becoming a full-color 3-D screen, complete with stereo. That's where I saw Knight, Druid, Amazon, etc. That's how I knew it was a party: There were food and a sound track, arrivals and departures. Gnome passed through it all, putting his clammy hands on everybody, twisting his face into a smile and being a perfect host.

Mana, mana, mana. Weapon, weapon, weapon. Nothing. Shit.

I watched for a long while, waiting. There had to be a reason for his bringing me around and showing me what was going on. I searched all of those familiar faces, overheard snatches of conversation, watched their movements. Nothing special. Why, then, was I awake and witnessing this. It had to be Gnome's doing, yet…

When I saw Gnome glance toward the high archway of the hall's major entrance for the third time in as many minutes, I realized that he, too, was waiting.

I searched my cell. Predictably, I found nothing of any benefit to me. While I was looking, though, I heard the noise level rise and I turned back to the images on the wall.

Magics were in progress. The hall must have been mana-rich. My colleagues were indulging themselves in some beautiful spellwork—flowers and faces and colors and vast, exotic, shifting vistas filled the screen now—just as such things must have run in ancient times. Ah! One drop! One drop of mana and I'd be out of here! To run and return? Or to seek immediate retaliation? I could not tell. If there were only some way I could draw it from the vision itself…

But Gnome had wrought too well. I could find no weak spot in the working before me. I stopped looking after a few moments, for another reason as well. Gnome was announcing the arrival of another guest.

The sound died and the picture faded at that point. The corridor beyond my cell seemed to grow slightly brighter. I moved toward it. This time my way was not barred, and I continued out into the lighter area. What had happened? Had some obscure force somehow broken Gnome's finely wrought spells?

At any rate, I felt normal now and I would be a fool to remain where he had left me. It occurred to me that this could be part of some higher trap or torture, but still—I had several choices now, which is always an improvement.

I decided to start back in the direction from which we had come earlier, rather than risk blundering into that gathering. Even if there was a lot of mana about there. Better to work my way back, I decided, tie up any mana I could find along the way in the form of protective spells and get the hell out.

I had proceeded perhaps twenty paces while formulating this resolution. Then the tunnel went through an odd twisting that I couldn't recall. I was still positive we had come this way, though, so I followed it. It grew a bit brighter as I moved along, too, but that seemed all for the better. It allowed me to hurry.

Suddenly, there was a sharp turning that I did not remember at all. I took it and I ran into a screen of pulsing white light, and then I couldn't stop. I was propelled forward, as if squeezed from behind. There was no way that I could halt. I was temporarily blinded by the light. There came a roaring in my ears.

And then it was past, and I was standing in the great hall where the party was being held, having emerged from some side entrance, in time to hear Gnome say, "…And the surprise guest is our long-lost brother Phoenix!"

I stepped backward, to retreat into the tunnel from which I had emerged, and I encountered something hard. Turning, I beheld only a blank wall of rock.

"Don't be shy, Phoenix. Come and say hello to your friends," Gnome was saying.

There was a curious babble, but above it from across the way came an animallike snarl and I beheld my old buddy Werewolf, lean and swarthy, eyes blazing, doubtless the guest who was just arriving when the picture had faded.

I felt panic. I also felt mana. But what could I work in only a few seconds' time?

My eyes were pulled by the strange movement in a birdcage on the table beside which Werewolf stood. The others' attitudes showed that many of them had just turned from regarding it.

It registered in an instant.

Within the cage, a nude female figure no more than a hand high was dancing. I recognized it as a spell of torment: The dancer could not stop. The dancing would continue until death, after which the body would still jerk about for some time.

And even from that distance I could recognize the small creature as Elaine.

The dancing part of the spell was simple. So was its undoing. Three words and a gesture. I managed them. By then Werewolf was moving toward me. He was not bothering with a shapeshift to his more fearsome form. I sidestepped as fast as I could and sought for a hold involving his arm and shoulder. He shook it off. He always was stronger and faster than me.

He turned and threw a punch, and I managed to duck and counterpunch to his midsection. He grunted and hit me on the jaw with a weak left. I was already backing away by then. I stopped and tried a kick and he batted it aside, sending me spinning to the floor. I could feel the mana all about me, but there was no time to use it.

"I just learned the story," I said, "and I had nothing to do with Lamia—"

He threw himself upon me. I managed to catch him in the stomach with my knee as he came down.

"Gnome took her..." I got out, getting in two kidney punches before his hands found my throat and began to tighten. "She's coal—"

I caught him once, high on the cheek, before he got his head down.

"Gnome—damn it!" I gurgled.

"It's a lie!" I heard Gnome respond from somewhere nearby, not missing a thing.

The room began to swim about me. The voices became a roaring, as of the ocean. Then a peculiar thing happened to my vision as well: Werewolf's head appeared to be haloed by a coarse mesh. Then it dropped forward, and I realized that his grip had relaxed.

I tore his hands from my throat and struck him once, on the jaw. He rolled away. I tried to also, in the other direction, but settled for struggling into a seated, then a kneeling, then a crouched, position.

I beheld Gnome, raising his hands in my direction, beginning an all-too-familiar and lethal spell. I beheld Werewolf, slowly removing a smashed birdcage from his head and beginning to rise again. I beheld the nude, full-size form of Elaine rushing toward us, her face twisted…

The problem of what to do next was settled by Werewolf's lunge.

It was a glancing blow to the midsection because I was turning when it connected. A dark form came out of my shirt, hovered a moment and dropped floorward: It was the small bottle of djinn Dervish had given me.

Then, just before Werewolf's fist exploded in my face, I saw something slim and white floating toward the back of his neck. I had forgotten that Elaine was second *Kyū* in Kyokushinkai—

Werewolf and I both hit the floor at about the same time, I'd guess.

…Black to gray to full-color; bumblebee hum to shrieks. I could not have been out for too long. During that time, however, considerable change had occurred.

For one, Elaine was slapping my face.

"Dave! Wake up!" she was saying. "You've got to stop it!"

"What?" I managed.

"That thing from the bottle!"

I propped myself on an elbow—jaw aching, side splitting—and I stared.

There were smears of blood on the nearest wall and table. The party had broken into knots of people, all of whom appeared to be in retreat in various stages of fear or anger. Some were working spells; some were simply fleeing. Amazon had drawn a blade and was holding it before her while gnawing her lower lip. Priest stood at her side, muttering a death spell, which I knew was not going to prove effective. Gnome's head was on the floor near the large archway, eyes open and unblinking. Peals of thunderlike laughter rang through the hall.

Standing before Amazon and Priest was a naked male figure almost ten feet in height, wisps of smoke rising from its dark skin, blood upon its upraised right fist.

"Do something!" Elaine said.

I levered myself a little higher and spoke the words Dervish had taught me, to put the djinn under my control. The fist halted, slowly came unclenched. The great bald head turned toward me, the dark eyes met my own.

"Master…?" it said softly.

I spoke the next words, of acknowledgment. Then I climbed to my feet and stood, wavering.

"Back into the bottle now—my command."

Those eyes left my own, their gaze shifting to the floor.

"The bottle is shattered, master," it said.

"So it is. Very well…"

I moved to the bar. I found a bottle of *Cutty Sark* with just a little left in the bottom. I drank it.

"Use this one, then," I said, and I added the words of compulsion.

"As you command," it replied, beginning to dissolve.

I watched the djinn flow into the Scotch bottle and then I corked it.

I turned to face my old colleagues.

"Sorry for the interruption," I said. "Go ahead with your party."

I turned again.

"Elaine," I said. "You okay?"

She smiled.

"Call me Dancer," she said. "I'm your new apprentice."

"A sorcerer needs a feeling for mana and a natural sensitivity to the way spells function," I said.

"How the hell do you think I got my size back?" she asked. "I felt the power in this place, and once you turned off the dancing spell, I was able to figure how to—"

"I'll be damned," I said. "I should have guessed your aptitude back at the cottage, when you grabbed that bone flute."

"See, you need an apprentice to keep you on your toes."

Werewolf moaned, began to stir. Priest and Amazon and Druid approached us. The party did not seem to be resuming. I touched my finger to my lips in Elaine's direction.

"Give me a hand with Werewolf," I said to Amazon. "He's going to need some restraining until I can tell him a few things."

◆ ◆ ◆

The next time we splashed through the Perseids, we sat on a hilltop in northern New Mexico, my apprentice and I, regarding the crisp, postmidnight sky and the occasional bright cloud-chamber effect within it. Most of the others were below us in a cleared area, the ceremonies concluded now. Werewolf was still beneath the Cornish hills, working with Druid, who recalled something of the ancient flesh-to-coal spell. Another month or so, he'd said, in the message he'd sent.

" 'Flash of uncertainty in sky of precision,' " she said.

"What?"

"I'm composing a poem."

"Oh." Then, after a time, I added, "What about?"

"On the occasion of my first Starfall," she replied, "with the mana gain apparently headed for another record."

"There's good and there's bad in that."

"...And the magic is returning and I'm learning the Art."

"Learn faster," I said.

"...And you and Werewolf are friends again."

"There's that."

"...You and the whole group, actually."

"No."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it. There are others. We just don't know which of them were in Gnome's corner. They won't want the rest of us around when the magic comes back. Newer, nastier spells—ones it would be hard to imagine now—will become possible when the power rises. We must be ready. This blessing is a very mixed thing. Look at them down there—the ones we were singing with—and see whether you can guess which of them will one day try to kill you. There will be a struggle, and the winners can make the outcome stick for a long time."

She was silent for a while.

"That's about the size of it," I added.

Then she raised her arm and pointed to where a fine of fire was traced across the sky. "There's one!" she said. "And another! And another!"

Later, "We can count on Werewolf now," she suggested, "and maybe Lamia, if they can bring her back. Druid, too, I'd guess."

"And Cowboy."

"Dervish?"

"Yeah, I'd say. Dervish."

"...And I'll be ready."

"Good. We might manage a happy ending at that."

We put our arms about each other and watched the fire fall from the sky.

A Word from Zelazny

"Here is the written-to-order story which appeared in *The Magic May Return*, the sort of sequel to *The Magic Goes Away*, by Larry Niven… Larry opened up this particular universe and invited some of us to come and party in it. I stepped in and began the dance. Oddly, the story tried to run away from me. This doesn't happen often, but I wanted a novelette, and it indicated that it wanted to turn into a novel. I was firm. I won. The results follow."[1]

Notes

Mana is a supernatural power; manna is food from the heavens or unexpected help. A posthumous Zelazny collection containing this story was punningly entitled *Manna from Heaven* as if to mean it was a gift from the deceased writer.

"Phoenix—Phoenix—burning—bright" suggests the opening lines from William Blake's poem "The Tyger": "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright || In the forests of the night, || What immortal hand or eye || Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" A **phoenix** is a beautiful bird fabled to live 500 or 600 years, burn itself on a funeral pyre, and rise from its ashes to begin a new life. **Tektites** are small spheres of brown or green silicate glass thought to be formed by the impact of a meteorite hitting the Earth. **El Chinchonal** is a volcano in Mexico. **Villahermosa** is the capital city of Tabasco, Mexico.

Proteus, Priest, Amazon, Gnome, Siren, Werewolf, Lamia, Lady, Sprite, and **Cowboy** are all invented characters. **Reach out, reach out and touch someone** is a ditty once used to advertise a long distance telephone company. A **mortise** is a hole designed to receive a projection (a **tenon**) to create a joint.

Jasmine, saffron, and **sandalwood** are used as spices, teas, incense, and in alchemy. A **narghile** or hookah is a Middle Eastern pipe in which the smoke is cooled by passing over water. An **adit** is a horizontal mine shaft. ***Kyū*** levels rank below black belt in karate; **Kyokushinkai** is a style of stand-up, full contact karate. ***Cutty Sark*** is a blended Scotch whiskey, named after a famous clipper ship. The **Perseids** are meteors in a shower that appears to originate from the constellation Perseus during the second week of August.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

DREAMSCAPE

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

Graham crackers on the patio
and peace in the afternoon.
It was a two-piano Sunday
under the darkness trees.
Lady high on the mountaintop
let down your auburn hair…
Cathedral bells in the city,
coffee in crystal cups…
The greenness of lawn
beneath unfurling cloud…
The notes have reached the dancer
at the center of the Earth…
The train bearing dead relatives
will come…
Pianos build an escalator of glass
tinkling in the middle air…
I have heard it said
that they will come…
Rainbows dance
on tread and riser,
the coffee steams in the cup.
High in the noon of June
a lopsided moon
drips venom
to the vectored eye.
The woods decay,
the rivers halt.

The world falls to the dancer,
Sunday apple,
earthdance cadenced, Mountain Lady,
blindeyed watcher,
falls, silent, Lady,
in ellipse and default—
I heard the bells expel.
Down then like diamond dominos
the stairway shuffled, fell.
Lady, Lady, let down your hair…
The train is coming, an eye
behind every bullet hole,
from out the vanishing point,
on tracks of gleaming bones.
The scapulae of buffalo
lie in the right of way,
…in ropes of auburn mercy.
Sacrificed pianos
and scattered cups
upon the fading lawn…
The ghost wind sings
thundersong.
One strand down the
firmament, Lady,
to world awake away…
And crumbled Graham crackers
feed the black birds…
The train fills
up the sky, mechanic
throb and eyes
like coded bullets…
I cannot see
the mountaintop. The
shadow grows before
the engine. The world
belongs
to the dancer, the dance
belongs
to the dream.
Dead eyes and iron thrust.

A Word from Zelazny

American poet-critic Robert Frazier called this poem a fantasy where daydream mixes with reality, music with dream, life with death. "Even after *Eye of Cat* had been written, the Indian material was still on my mind. Even though the Ghost Dance wasn't Navajo, I'd researched that, too, and I still felt a sort of fascination. Hence 'Dreamscape' which strangely was also the title of a script Twentieth Century Fox paid me to do around that time, about someone who could get into others' dreams, an idea like my *Dream Master*. Though when the movie actually appeared [in 1984] it bore no resemblance to my script, and I had no screen credit, it was still curious, the coincidence, because of course Fox had no idea I'd just used the title for the poem."[1]

Notes

Scapulae are the bones commonly referred to as shoulder blades.

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[1] *Critical Wave #33*, November 1993.

RIPTIDE

A Rhapsody in Amber (as "Then, Again"), Cheap Street 1981.

Riptide and *forsitan. Tal vez,* too. *Vielleicht,* perhaps.
I sometimes think of stories I have never written…
    He has made it through the 470-meter navigable aperture
    at the spinning disc-edge of a black hole
    equivalent to eight solar masses.
    (Clever computer, Anubis-like, to guide him.)
    Now, telling the story,
    a page from *Descent into the Maelstrom,*
    as he flashes by,
    he shows his alien audience
    his own ship, *this* ship,
    hanging there, bug-in-web-like,
    upon the event horizon.
    Grand final image.
    (Or would photon-decay do it in?)
Didn't like it. Not really a story. Hence, nothing.
Except for that damned image…
Watching your own eternal doom. Cracking jokes about it…

One of the great pleasures of mortality, I suppose,
is knowing that others are suffering, too.
And of writing, that others have fragments
that drive them just as mad:
    Medusa smiled…
    God Owes Me $6.57…
    Itself Surprised…
    The Cyborg Connection…

"Send them an Apocalypse Card."
"Think dead thoughts."
"You have ten minutes to fall in love."
The greatest argument I know for sadistic deities
is that inspiration comes in pieces
and some of them never fit.

Objective correlatives are nice things to have about,
but these are untidy scraps that almost make it,
and could, I suppose, correlate
if they tried just a little harder.
But they won't. After awhile you feel sure.
It is from their species that I learned
the true meaning of love-hate,
a lesson one can usually do without.
Somewhere deep within there may be a message,
but they hung up before I got it.

There should be a divorce-getting,
stake-driving process available,
a rite of exorcism for not-quite-ideas
that simply won't give up.
Seizing them and strewing them across the ergosphere
may be the only way.
But if they were to make it through
that damned aperture
and return to show me themselves,
bug-like, in the web of forces, waving—
Day of Homeothermy, The Man with the Wooden Heart,
Startangle, Cheeterwing, Chuttle and Pocketstar—
I would…

Bleed upon them, I suppose,
curse, send the tracenfeef, shiddoes and slugell
off to the Quickwind where the Dweeble dwells
to struff their guffs where the antiblob
flarts before the Logrus.
Even then, I wonder…
There may be things of which I never shall be free,
immortal as myself, bugging me down the ages,

proof against revenge.
My world is crowded and an alien valley.
They sing against the closing of my eyes.

Notes

Zelazny explores the creative writing process, battling with his muse. Familiar characters appear in this poem, some not yet written into his books when he composed it. Zelazny commented that characters lived with him for a time, dropping by for morning coffee until their stories were told, and some (like Kalifriki) lingered for a sequel (see afterwords for "Kalifriki of the Thread" and "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love").

A **riptide** is a strong surface current flowing away from the shore. ***Forsitan*** (Latin), ***tal vez*** (Spanish) and ***vielleicht*** (German) all mean "perhaps." **Anubis** is the jackal- or dog-faced Egyptian god of tombs, weigher of the hearts of the dead. ***Descent into the Maelstrom*** is a tale by Edgar Allan Poe. The phrase **hanging there…upon the event horizon** suggests 1995's "The Three Descents of Jeremy Baker." **Medusa** has snakes for hair, and her gaze turns a man to stone. ***Itself Surprised*** became a berserker story; ***The Cyborg Connection*** became the manuscript title for "Halfjack". The **ergosphere** is the theoretical region around a black hole from which energy can escape. The **logrus** emerged in the second Amber series.

DEVIL AND THE DANCER

Dilvish, the Damned, Del Rey/Ballantine 1982.
§ *Dilvish* 9 of 11

The moon hung round and the cold winds blew when Oele danced for Devil, her footmarks traced in fire before the empty stone-faced altar. In the lands below it was already spring but here in the mountains the night spoke of winter. Still, she danced barefooted, wearing but a flimsy gray garment belted with silver, more revealing than concealing her lithe figure as she raised the fires in ancient patterns, her long blond hair streaming about her.

The ground became a flickering tapestry, yet she was not burned. Far below on the northern slope, a ghostly palace quivered in the moonlight, towers fading to the point of transparency and regaining partial solidity moments later, walls moving to join with shadow and fleeing from it, lights waxing and waning behind high windows. The voice of the wind was a raw, shrieking thing, but neither did Oele feel the cold.

The darkness grew more dense above the altar until finally it blotted out stars. As this occurred, the wind died down and ceased. The flames sprang higher then, but the great blot above the stone was not illuminated thereby. It was a massive, rough-winged outline, great-headed and rippling. It seemed almost a hole in space itself, and she received the impression of enormous depths within it whenever her eyes passed that way.

She had danced thus, at certain seasons, down the years, beyond the memories of any who dwelled in the vicinity. All of these called her witch, and she, too, thought of herself in this fashion. The only one who knew more called her by a different title, though the distinction had become considerably frayed in the years since a dancing girl had slain her lover upon this spot to gain the powers he alone of all men had possessed. A priest he had been, the last surviving worshipper of an old god who, as a result, had valued him highly. Now Oele was the last worshipper, and she did not even know the god's name. She called him Devil and he granted her wishes in response to her choreographed acts of devotion, which she considered spells. A witch invoking a devil, a god responding to a worshipper, then—it was partly a matter of perspective, but only partly. For the things she asked of him were more in keeping with her own notions, and their relations were far removed from what his had been with his original worshippers long ago.

Yet between them the bond was strong. He drew strength from her dancing, from this final contact with the earth. And she also gained, many things.

At last her movements ceased and she stood amidst her design, facing the dark shape above the altar stone. For long moments a heavy stillness hung between them, until finally she spoke:

"Devil, I bring you my dance."

The figure seemed to nod, then to grow slightly. Finally, in a voice deep and slow, it replied:

"It is pleasing to me."

She waited, a ritualistically prolonged silence, then spoke again:

"My palace fades."

Again the pause, then the words "I know," followed by the gesture of a jagged, winglike member from the bottomless shadow, toward the place down the slope occupied by the wavering structure.

"Behold, priestess, it is firm once again."

She looked and saw that this was true. Now, in the moonlight, the palace stood still and substantial, its lights gleaming steadily, its ramparts thrusting prowlike against the night and the stars.

"I see," she finally replied. "But for how long will it remain thus? One by one my servants vanish, returning to the earth from which they sprang."

"They are with you once more."

"But for how long?" she repeated. "This is the third time I have had to call upon you to restore order in less than a year."

The figure was silent much longer than the customary period.

"Tell me, Devil!"

"I cannot say for certain, priestess," it answered at last. "I have been growing weaker. Considerable energy is required to support yourself and your establishment for long periods—more than I can transform from your dance."

"What then is to be done?"

"You could choose a simpler way of life."

"I must have magnificence!"

"Soon I will lack the force to sustain it."

"Then you shall again have something stronger than my dancing!"

"I do not ask this."

"Yet you accept it when it becomes necessary."

"I accept it."

"Then you shall have sufficient man's blood to restore your powers, and to enhance my own."

There was silence.

"I begin now the closing dance," she stated, and as she commenced moving once again the flames died with each step that she retraced, the wind grew up about her, and the figure above the altar thinned and faded, giving back a fistful of stars.

When she had finished, she turned away and walked toward the palace without looking back. It was time to prepare for a journey, through the land below, to a seacoast town where it was said that anything one wanted could always be found.

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The lady on the black-maned gray mare wore tan leather breeches and jacket and a brown and red cloak. Her hair and long-lashed eyes were dark and her wide mouth appeared to be faintly, perhaps unconsciously, working its way toward a smile. She wore a jade ring upon the middle finger of her left hand, an onyx one upon her right. A short sword hung from her belt.

Her companion wore black breeches and green jacket and boots. His cloak was black, lined with green, and he wore a sword and dagger at his waist. He sat astride a black, horse-shaped creature whose body appeared to be of metal.

The two of them led three pack horses up the mountain trails through the brisk, clear afternoon air. The sound of running water came to their ears from somewhere ahead.

"The weather improves daily," the lady remarked. "After the regions we've traveled through, this seems almost summerish."

"Once we've quitted these heights," the man replied, "things should be even more comfortable. And when we reach the coast it could almost be balmy. We'll get you to Tooma at a good time of year."

The lady looked away.

"I am no longer so eager to reach the place…"

Bearing to the right, they rounded a rocky promontory. The man's mount made a strange noise. Turning his head, the rider scanned the trail.

"We are not alone," he observed.

She followed his gaze to where a man was seated upon a rock ahead and to the right. His hair and beard were pure white and he was dressed in animal skins. As they watched him, he stood, leaning upon a staff that was taller than himself.

"Hello," he hailed.

"Greetings," said the green-booted rider, coming to a halt before him. "How fare you?"

"Well enough," the man replied. "Do you travel far?"

"Yes. Down to Tooma, at least."

The man nodded.

"You'll not be out of these hills tonight."

"I know. I glimpsed a castle far ahead. Perhaps they'll let us sleep within its walls."

"Mayhap they will. For its mistress, Oele, has always been kindly disposed toward travelers, with a liking for whatever tales they bring. I am, as a fact, headed that way myself, to partake of the place's hospitality—though I've heard the lady is traveling at the moment. That beast you ride has a most unusual appearance, sir."

"He has indeed."

"…And you've a somewhat familiar look, if I may say it. May I ask your name?"

"I am Dilvish, and this is Reena."

The lady nodded and smiled.

"Not a common name, yours. There was a Dilvish, long ago…"

"I do not believe that castle stood in those days."

"To be sure, it did not. This was then the home of a hill tribe, reasonably content with its flocks and its god—whose name has since been forgotten. But the cities grew up below and—"

"Taksh'mael," Dilvish said.

"What?"

"Taksh'mael was their god," Dilvish answered, "keeper of the flocks. A friend and I once laid an offering on his altar when we passed this way—long ago. I wonder whether the altar still stands."

"Oh, it does, where it has always stood… You are definitely a member of a minority to have it in mind at all. Perhaps 'twere better you did not stop at the castle… Seeing the area come upon such bad times could not but depress one such as yourself. On second thinking, I'd say ride on and clear this poor place from your mind. Remember it as once it was."

"Thank you, but we have traveled a great distance," Dilvish replied. "It does not seem worth the extra effort merely to preserve a few sensibilities. We will go to the castle."

The man's large, pale eyes fixed him, then jerked away. With one hand he groped beneath his shaggy garments, then he limped forward, extending that hand toward Dilvish.

"Take this," he muttered. "You should have it."

"What is it?" Dilvish asked, automatically reaching down.

"A trifle," said the other. "An old thing I've had a long while, a mark of the god's favor and protection. One who remembers Taksh'mael ought to have such hereabouts."

Dilvish examined it, a fragment of gray stone veined with pink, into which the image of a ram had been scratched. It was pierced on one end and a worn woolen strand passed through this aperture.

"Thank you," he said, reaching for his bag. "I'd like to give you something in return."

"No," said the old man, turning away. " 'Tis a freely given gift, and I've no use for citified geegaws. And 'tis not much for all that. The newer gods can afford much fancier, I'm certain."

"Well, may he guard your footsteps."

"At my age, I doubt it matters. Fare thee well."

He hiked off among the rocks and was soon gone from sight.

"Black, what do you make of it?" Dilvish asked, leaning forward to dangle the charm before his mount.

"There is some power in it," Black replied, "but it is of a tainted magic. I am not at all sure that I would trust anyone who bestows such a thing."

"First he told us to stop at the castle, then he told us to pass it by. On which piece of advice shall we mistrust him?"

"Let me see it, Dilvish," Reena said.

He dropped it into her hands and she studied it for a long while.

"True, it is as Black says…" she finally began.

"Should I keep it or throw it away?"

"Oh, keep it," she replied, passing it back. "Magic is like money. Who cares where it comes from? It's what you spend it on that counts."

"That is only true if you can control the expenditure," he said. "Do you want to stop at the castle? Or shall we travel as far as we can tonight?"

"The animals are getting tired."

"True."

"I believe he was a bit dotty."

"Most likely."

"A real bed would be very nice."

"Then we shall visit the castle."

Black was silent as they moved ahead.

❖ ❖ ❖

Oil lamps, candles, and a large fireplace lit the tavern where Oele danced. Sailors, tradesmen, soldiers, and assorted rogues and citizens drank and dined at the heavy wooden tables. Tonight she wore her blue and green costume, and two musicians accompanied her energetic movements in the cleared area at the rear of the main room. Business had improved considerably since she had come to town two weeks earlier, and though she had received three proposals of marriage and many other sorts of offers, yet did she remain unattached. Nor did her lack of a hardy male companion result in many difficulties. A steady gaze and a single, imperious gesture terminated the undesired attentions of the most importunate, causing a man to drop senseless to the ground. It was obvious that she did not desire the beery embraces of most patrons of the place, though her eyes searched every face during the course of an evening. And now there were some new ones. A caravan had come in from the west that afternoon, and a ship had arrived from southern waters. Tonight's crowd was even noisier than usual.

One tall son of the desert drew her eyes—slow-moving, dark, and hawkish. His flowing garments did not conceal his sturdy, well-proportioned frame. He took his ease near the doorway, sipping wine and smoking from a complicated contraption he had set upon the table before him. A number of similarly garbed men were seated at the same table, conversing in their sibilant tongue. The tall man's eyes never left her, and she began to feel that he might be the one. There were signs of great vitality in even the smallest of his movements.

A group of sailors arrived as the evening wore on, but she ignored them. By then she was dancing only for the one she had chosen. And it became apparent from the light in his eyes, his smile, and the words he had spoken as she passed near that he was captivated. He would be a fine one. Another hour and she would take him away…

"Move it this way, lady. I like it."

She glanced to her right toward the man who had spoken and saw blue eyes beneath a wild thatch of coppery hair, a gold earring, very white teeth, a red neckerchief—one of the sailors who had just come in. It was difficult to judge his size, leaned forward the way he was.

She did move nearer, studying him. Interesting scar on his chin… Big, capable hands on the table before him…

She moved her lips through a faint smile. He was more animated than the other, and certainly as filled with life. She wondered…

She heard a noise at her back and turned without missing a step. The trader was standing, glaring at the sailor. His men were also rising. She continued to smile and turned away again. The music died abruptly. She heard an oath, loud in the sudden stillness.

"You're a live one," the sailor said, getting to his feet. "I hope you're worth it."

All at once the entire room seemed to be in motion as tables and seats were upset. The sailors and traders moved toward one another, blades appearing almost magically in their hands. The other patrons scurried to sheltered vantages or quit the establishment entirely via the nearest exits. Showing no fear, Oele removed herself several paces, to make room for the combat.

The sailor she watched was moving forward in a low crouch, a stiletto in his right hand. The tall trader brandished a longer, curved blade. As their men struggled with one another about them, they pushed their way toward a cleared area nearer the center of the room as if by mutual consent. From somewhere a flagon sped toward the back of the trader's head. Oele gestured sharply and it veered off to shatter against the wall.

The sailor rolled away from the first slash of the other's blade and riposted instantly with a high overhand thrust that nicked the man's biceps. He could not dodge the countercut, however, but managed to parry it with his own weapon. He danced away then, unable to counterthrust beyond the other's greater length of blade. He began to circle him widdershins, his feet shuffling and stamping. As his back was for a moment exposed to the general melée, a small trader rushed toward him. Oele gestured again and it was as if the shorter man had been seized by a giant hand and cast sideways across the room. She sniffed and licked her lips.

In circling, the sailor's foot encountered a small stool. He kicked it toward the other. Despite his lengthy garments, however, the trader avoided it with a quick movement and cut again toward his opponent's head. But the sailor had drawn a belaying pin from his sash, and he blocked the blow with it, moved in rapidly, and thrust toward the other's belly.

The trader managed to recover and parry in time, but it left him in an awkward position at very close quarters. The belaying pin struck him on the side of the head. He fell back, obviously dazed, swinging a wide parry, and the club took him again, high upon the left cheekbone. He stumbled and the club rose and fell twice more in rapid succession. He sprawled upon the floor and lay unmoving, garments disarrayed. The sailor advanced and kicked the blade from his extended hand. Still he did not stir. Breathing heavily, the seaman wiped his brow and smiled up at Oele, thrusting the pin back into his sash.

"Well done," she said. "Almost."

He glanced at his blade, then shook his head.

"It's done," he said. "I'll not be sticking him just for your amusement."

He placed his blade back into a sheath on the side of his right boot. The fighting between the sailors and the traders still continued behind him but already showed some signs of slowing, losing force. After one quick glance in that direction, the seaman bowed to Oele.

"Captain Reynar," he said, "at your service. Master of my own vessel, *Tiger's Foot.*" He extended his arm. "Come now and I'll show her to you. I think you might enjoy cruising the southern waterways."

She took his arm and they turned.

"I think not," she said. "For I, too, rule in my own place, which I am not about to forsake. Shall we save these poor fellows from further injury?"

She made a sweeping gesture toward the remaining combatants, and they all fell unconscious to the floor.

"Now that's a fine trick," he said, "and one which I wouldn't mind knowing."

She gestured again as they advanced and the door swung open before them.

"Perhaps I'll teach you," she answered, as they passed outside. "But my rooms are nearer than your ship and doubtless less cramped—though we'll be leaving them in the morning on a journey to the heights."

He grinned at her.

"It would take a lot to persuade a captain to desert his vessel—with no disrespect to your obvious charms."

"Cup your hands."

He released her arm and did so. She covered his hands with her own and a clinking sound began. Moments later he strained at an unexpected weight. She raised her hands and his were filled with gleaming coins. More continued to drop into them, spilling over and falling to the ground.

"Stop! Stop! They're getting away!" he cried.

She laughed, a sound not unlike the rattle of the gold, but the deluge of money ceased. He began stowing the coins in various places about his person. He knelt and recovered the fallen ones. He examined them. He bit one.

"Real! They're real!" he said.

"What were you saying about a captain and his ship?"

"You've no idea how wretched a thing the seafaring life can be. I've always wanted to live in the mountains." He touched his brow and offered his arm again. "Which direction?" he asked.

* * *

The sun had passed behind the mountain, casting long shadows, though day still lay upon the land below when Dilvish and Reena approached the castle they had seen hours earlier.

They halted and stared at it. Pennants were flapping upon battlements and tower tops and there seemed to be a light behind every window. The portcullis was raised and a faint sound of music came from within.

"What do you think?" Dilvish said.

"I was comparing it to the castle that was my home," Reena replied. "It looks fine to me."

They peered in through the gate. A woman who had been waiting near it stepped through and hailed them:

"Travelers! You are welcome here if you are seeking shelter."

Dilvish gestured toward the trappings upon the walls, toward the long carpet that he now saw stretched beyond the gate.

"What is the occasion," he asked, "for the display?"

"Our mistress has been away," the woman replied. "She will return tonight with her new consort."

"She must be a remarkable woman, to keep such an establishment in this place."

"She is indeed, sir."

Dilvish stared a moment longer.

"I've a mind to stay here," he finally said.

"…And I've a body that would welcome some ease," Reena told him.

"Let's go."

They advanced until they reached the squat, dark-haired woman who had called to them. Her hands were large, her movements deliberate; her face was peppered with moles. She smiled a large-toothed smile and conducted them within.

Dilvish counted five other servants—two women and three men—laboring at various chores in the courtyard. Among these, several were hanging additional decorations. The woman who had welcomed them called to one of the men.

"He will take care of your horses," she stated. Then she turned and eyed Black. "Except for this one. What do you wish done with him?"

Dilvish glanced toward a small corner area off to his left.

"If I might, I would leave him over there," he said. "He will not move."

"You are certain?"

"I am certain."

"Very well. Do it. Set aside the things you would have taken in and I will help you bear them to your chamber. You will dine at the mistress's table later."

"In that case, I'll want that larger one," Reena said, indicating a pack, while Dilvish and Black moved off toward the chosen corner.

"I am vaguely troubled," Black said, "by our meeting with that old man. So I will not wander off from this body while it stands here. Should you need me, summon me and I will come."

"All right," Dilvish said, "though I doubt I will need to."

Black snorted and grew still, becoming a statue of a horse. Dilvish dismounted, hefted his gear, and followed the others inside.

The woman who had met them, whose name they had learned was Andra, conducted them to a third-floor chamber overlooking the courtyard.

"When the mistress and her man arrive, we will summon you to dinner and an entertainment," she said. "In the meantime, is there anything you might need?"

Dilvish shook his head.

"Thank you, no. I am curious, though, how you know exactly when she will arrive. You seem fairly far removed from most other places."

Andra looked puzzled.

"She is the mistress," she replied. "We know."

After she had departed, Dilvish nodded toward the door.

"Strange…" he said.

"Perhaps not," Reena replied. "There *is* a peculiar feeling to this place. I should recognize it if anyone should, though it is not as strong as it was in my former home. I believe this Mistress Oele might be a Minor adept of some sort. Even her servants all seem to have the dull responsiveness of someone under control."

"You have never heard of her, though—or of anyone in this vicinity—as a sister in the Art?"

"No. But there are so many lesser practitioners about that one cannot keep track of them all. Only the doings of the big ones provide general subjects for gossip."

"Such as those of your former employer?"

She turned toward him, eyes narrowed.

"Must you turn every conversation back to your enemy and your revenge?" she said. "I hate him, too, and I know he put you through a lot. He also killed my brother! But I'm sick of hearing about him!"

"I—I am sorry," he replied. "I suppose that I have become somewhat single-minded…"

She laughed.

"'Somewhat'?" she said. "Do you live for anything else? Do you ever listen to yourself? The way he controls your every thought, your every action, you might as well be under his spell! If you succeed in destroying him, what then? Is there anything else left of your life? You—"

She broke off and turned away.

"I am sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have said any of that."

"No," he replied, not looking at her. "You're right. I never noticed. But you are right. Would you believe that I was raised to be a courtier—that I played music and sang, wrote poetry…? I did other things later because of circumstances, but my birth was gentle. It was only by accident that I developed certain military aptitudes, and necessity that furthered such a career. I had always intended—something else. Now…How long ago all that seems! You have said something true. I wonder…"

"What?"

"What I *would* do if it were all over. Return to my homeland perhaps, try to resolve some ancient wrongs against our house—"

"*Another* vendetta?"

He laughed, a thing she had seldom heard.

"More likely a matter of dull legalities. I *am* going to think about it, and a lot of other things, now. Even the big—gap—in my life has shifted a bit, from nightmare to dream. Yes, I should occasionally concern myself with other matters."

"Such as?"

"What to do until dinner time, for one."

"I'll help you think of something," she told him, coming across the room.

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The torches blazed and crackled and the sounds of music were all about them as Reynar and Oele entered her courtyard, riding across the long carpet, garlanded with flowers her servants had cast upon them as they passed through the gate. Oele nodded and smiled and the shadows danced and slithered. Then her expression froze as her gaze fell upon a dark shape in a distant corner, metallic highlights upon its surface. She drew rein and pointed.

"What," she asked in a loud voice, "is that?"

Andra rushed to her side.

"It belongs to a guest, mistress," she stated, "a man named Dilvish, who came by earlier. I offered hospitality, as you have always wished."

Oele dismounted, handing Andra the reins. She crossed the courtyard and stood before Black. Then she circled him, still staring. Finally she put out a jeweled hand and slapped his shoulder. A ringing sound followed. She backed away, then returned to Andra.

"How," she said, "did he transport a statue of a horse through the mountains? And why?"

"Well, it is a statue now, ma'am," Andra replied, "but he rode in on it. Said it wouldn't move when he left it there. It hasn't."

Oele looked back at Black. In the meantime, Reynar had dismounted and moved to her side.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

She took his hand and led him across the yard toward the main doorway.

"That—thing," she said, with a jerk of her head, "bore its master here earlier."

"How can that be?" Reynar asked. "It looks pretty stiff to me."

"Obviously our guest is a sorcerer," she replied. "I find this more than a little awkward."

"How so?"

"We hurried to get home today because it is tonight when the moon stands full in high heaven that I must do the things to insure the power of which I spoke."

"To grant me powers like your own?"

She smiled.

"Of course."

They mounted a stair and passed into a large entrance hall. There was more music, from somewhere off to the left. Reynar sniffed exotic perfumes.

"And this sorcerer…?" he inquired.

"I don't care for the idea of having one of his sort about just now. His arrival is strangely timed."

Reynar smiled as she led him toward a stair.

"It may be that I can arrange the time of his departure to suit your taste," he said.

She patted his arm.

"Let us not be too hasty. We will dine with the man and take his measure shortly."

She led him up the stairway and into her chambers, where she rang for a servant. A woman resembling Andra, though taller and heavier, answered the summons.

"When," Oele asked her, "will dinner be ready?"

"As soon as you wish, ma'am. They are all dishes of a sooner or later sort. The meat has been turning slowly on a low flame for some time."

"We shall dine an hour hence. Ask the man to join us."

"Only the man, ma'am? Not his woman?"

"I did not realize that there were two of them. Say me their names."

"He is called Dilvish, and his lady is Reena."

"I've heard that name before," Reynar said. "Dilvish…It seemed familiar when the other one mentioned it out in the yard. A military man, perhaps?"

"I do not know," the woman answered.

"Of course you are to tell Reena also," Oele said. "Go and do it now."

The woman departed and Oele laid out her clothing for the evening—a surprisingly simple gray garment and a silver belt. She stepped behind a screen where water and towels awaited her, and shortly after that Reynar heard splashing sounds.

"What do you know of this man?" she finally called out.

Reynar, who had crossed to the window and was staring out over the yard, turned.

"I believe he is said to have distinguished himself at a place called Portaroy," he answered, "in those interminable East-West border wars. Something about his riding a metal horse and having raised an army of the dead. But I don't recall the details. I know nothing of the woman."

"He's a long way from Portaroy," she said. "I wonder what he is doing here?"

He moved to her dressing table where he combed his hair and cleaned his fingernails. He located a nondescript piece of cloth and began wiping his boots with it.

"Uh—if he is here for something which might be at cross-purposes with your own plans for tonight," he said, "can you deal with—something like that?"

"Do not worry yourself," she replied. "I am not without certain resources. I'll take care of you."

"I never doubted it," he said, smiling and polishing his belt buckle.

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Reena had changed into a long, décolleté green dress with black trim and puffed sleeves, Dilvish into a brown blouse and soft green leather vest, his black trousers belted with matching green. They heard the music from the dining hall as they descended the stair—strings and a flute, slow. Soon the cooking odors reached them.

"I'm anxious to meet our hostess," Dilvish stated.

"I must confess I am more anxious to make the acquaintance of a warm meal," Reena said. "How long since that last inn? Over a week…"

Smiling, Oele rose when her guests entered. Reynar hastened to imitate her. The introductions were brief, and she bade Dilvish and Reena be seated. Servants moved to bring in the first course and to pour wine. A fire crackled on the hearth, across from Dilvish, behind Reena. The musicians were stationed at the far end of the room.

They had been eating for several minutes before Dilvish realized that there was another diner, not in their company. At a small table at the far side of the fireplace sat an old man clad in skins, his staff leaning against the wall. It appeared to be the same man who had met them on the trail earlier. When their eyes met, he smiled and nodded. The man gestured toward his throat and Dilvish touched the charm inside his shirt and nodded back.

"I hadn't noticed the old man," Dilvish remarked.

"Oh, he's been by before," Oele said. "Keeps flocks. Passes this way occasionally. Reynar tells me that he believes he recalls your name in connection with a place called Portaroy. Did he get it right?"

Dilvish nodded.

"I fought there."

"I've begun remembering stories I've heard," Reynar said. "Is it true that the metal beast you ride is really a demon who helped you to escape from Hell and that one day he will carry you off?"

"He carries me off almost every day," said Dilvish, smiling, "and he has helped me in many ways—and I, him."

"...And there was some business about a statue. Is it true that you once were one—as the beast is now?"

Dilvish looked down at his hands.

"Yes," he said softly.

"Extraordinary," Oele remarked. "Might I ask what brings a man of your—background—so far from the scene of your triumphs?"

"Revenge," he said, beginning to eat again. "I am on my way to find someone who has caused me and a great number of other people a good deal of trouble."

"Who might that be?" Reynar asked.

"I do not wish to bring a curse upon this place by mentioning his name in it. He is a sorcerer."

"You seem to find yourself bad enemies," Reynar said. "We've that in common. I slew a sorcerer once, in the Eastern Isles. Damn near suffocated me before I could reach him. He'd stopped my breathing. Fortunately, I'd had some experience at pearl diving..."

Dilvish turned his attention back to his meal. A fresh question every now and then kept the sailor talking about his voyages. From the corner of his eye, Dilvish noted signs of growing exasperation on Oele's part, but she seemed to restrain herself each time he had thought her ready to silence the man. Then Dilvish realized from the direction of his smiles that Reena seemed to be listening to him with a growing fascination, even to the neglect of her food; nor were his smiles unreturned. Dilvish glanced at Oele and she quirked an eyebrow at him. He shrugged.

Suddenly everything about her was extremely beautiful and desirable. Far more so than moments before. He recognized the feeling, though the knowledge in no way detracted from the impression. Glamourie. He had felt it years before in his homeland. She was magically enhancing her natural appeal. Yet it lasted for but a moment, faded, and left her as she had been. What had been its purpose, he wondered. A promise? An invitation?

When they had finished eating, Oele rose, fixed him with her eyes, and said, "Come dance with me."

He got to his feet and moved alongside the table toward the vacant area at the end of the room near the musicians. As he did, he saw that Reena and Reynar were also rising.

He took Oele's hand and began to move to the music—stately, slow. It was a variation of something he had learned long ago, and he quickly met the rhythms. Oele moved with considerable grace, and whenever she faced him she was smiling. She seemed to be moving nearer on each such occasion.

"Your wife is very lovely," she said.

"She is not my wife," he replied. "I am escorting her to a city in the south."

"…And after that?"

"I will be about the business I mentioned earlier. I've no desire to expose another to the danger."

"Interesting," she said, turning away again. When next she faced him, she continued, "I gather you do not care to speak much about such things, but are you a binder of demons? Can you control them?"

Dilvish studied her face, learned nothing from it.

"Yes," he finally said. "I've some experience in the area."

After several more beats of the music, he asked, "Why?"

"If you were to succeed in binding a truly strong one to your will," she said, "might it not serve you well in this struggle with your sorcerer?"

"Possibly," he replied, raising her hand and lowering it again.

She brushed against him.

"It would be better," she said, "to control such a one than to have it control you, to order it about without having to pay it first—wouldn't you say?"

He nodded.

"That applies to most servants and services, doesn't it?" he said.

"Of course," she agreed. Then: "I have such a one about…"

"Here? In the castle?" Dilvish almost halted.

She shook her head.

"Nearby."

"And you want me to subdue it?"

"Yes."

"Do you know its name?"

"No. Is that important?"

"It is essential. I had assumed you know something of these matters."

"Why?"

"There is that about you which bespeaks some involvement with such forces."

"I pay for my powers, but I do not understand them. I am tired of paying. If I get you the name will you take control of the devil and remain here with me?"

"…And Reena?"

"You said that she is not important, that you will be disposing of her shortly…"

"I did not say that she is not important. What of Reynar…?"

"He is not important."

Dilvish was silent for several measures. Then: "If you merely wish to be rid of your demon, I might be able to manage it without the name," he said.

"I do not wish to be rid of it. I want to establish complete control over it."

"I am not at all sure your demon would be that beneficial to me, but if you had the name I might be persuaded to stay a little longer and see what I can do for you."

She was against him for a moment.

"I will enjoy persuading you," she said. "Perhaps even tomorrow."

Their hands rose and fell again. Dilvish glanced toward Reena and Reynar. They seemed to be talking, but he could not overhear what was being said.

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As Reena rose from a curtsey in time to the music, she noted the direction of her partner's gaze and smiled.

"Ah, lady! You're about to pop out of that gown," he said. " 'Tis pity we're not alone somewhere, where the matter might be pursued to its proper conclusion."

"For how long have you known Oele?" Reena asked, still smiling.

"A few weeks."

"Men are hardly models of loyalty," she said. "But even so, it seems brief even for an infatuation."

"Well, now…" His face grew serious. He looked away from her breasts and glanced at Oele. "I've no reason to lie to a stranger. She's lovely and lively—but I'm just a bit afraid of her. You see, she's a sorceress."

"Nonsense," said Reena. "She did not respond to any of the recognition signs common in the profession when I made them to her."

"You?" he said, his eyes widening. "I don't believe it!"

She gestured and the room vanished. They danced through phosphorescent caverns, towering stalagmites standing like pillars all about. Moments later they swirled across pale sands on a green sea bottom, bright corals and brighter fish at every hand. This, too, passed in an instant, to be replaced by the starstrewn darkness of outer space, far from any habitation of men. Giantlike, godlike, they trod the constellations, silently, to the omnipresent measures of the dance. Her hand passed like a slow, flickering comet before his eyes. They were back in the firelit, candlelit hall again, continuing the dance, and not a step missed.

"I say that your lady is not a sorceress," Reena stated. "I really ought to know."

"Then what is she?" he asked. "I know she's certain powers to command. She's knocked men unconscious with a gesture. She's filled my fists with gold when there was no gold."

"That gold will turn to pebbles and dust," Reena said.

" 'Tis a good thing then that I spent it quickly," he replied. "I'd best avoid certain people next I pass that way. But if that isn't sorcery, what is?"

"Sorcery," she replied, "is an art. It requires considerable study and discipline. One must generally apply oneself for a fairly long period even to obtain the relatively modest status I have achieved. But there are some other routes to magical power. One might be born with a natural aptitude and be able, to produce many of the effects without the training. This is mere wizardry, however, and sooner or later—unless one is very lucky or careful—such a one gets into trouble from lack of knowledge concerning the laws involved in the phenomena. I do not believe that this is the case with your lady, though. A wizard usually bears some identifying mark visible to others in the trade."

"What then is her secret?"

"She may draw her power directly from a magical being she either serves or controls."

Reynar's eyes widened and he looked toward Oele again. He licked his lips and nodded.

"I believe that's it," he said. Then: "Tell me, is such power transferable? Can it be shared?"

"Why, yes," she answered. "It could be done. The other would serve, also—or share control, as the case may be."

"Is there any danger in such a thing?"

"Well…possibly. There are too many things about the situation that I do not understand. But why would she want to share her power? I wouldn't."

He looked away.

"Perhaps I have too high an opinion of myself," he finally said. "How long will you be about?"

"We should be leaving in the morning."

"Where are you headed?"

"Southward."

"On your mission of vengeance?"

She shook her head.

"Not mine. His. I'll be starting a new life, perhaps in Tooma. He will be continuing on. I don't believe I can talk him out of it—or should if I could."

"In other words, you'll be going your own ways before very long?"

The right corner of her mouth tightened.

"It looks that way."

"Supposing," he said, "supposing we both just chucked everything and ran away together? I've my own ship, and it's south I'd be going if I were to be leaving suddenly. There are a lot of strange and interesting ports. There would be some excitement, new foods, dancing—and of course the good company of myself."

Reena was surprised to find herself blushing.

"But we've just met," she said. "I hardly know you at all. I—"

"It does work both ways, and I'll admit I'm an impulsive devil. But I've always been good to my women, for so long as we're together."

She laughed.

"It's a little too sudden, but thank you anyway. Besides," she said, "I'm more than a little afraid of the sea."

He shook his head.

"I had to try, as you're the loveliest thing I've ever seen. If you should change your mind while you're still in a position to do something about it, remember that I'm wavering here myself because of my fear. Your decision would make mine."

"I'm flattered," she said, "and it might be fun for a time, but no. You will have to make your own decision, for yourself."

"Then I've a mind to go along with things," he said, "and see what happens. The gain might still be great."

"I might guess at the things," said she, "and I wish you luck. When?"

He looked to the window, where a pale glow was now visible.

"The moon is rising," he replied.

"I'd suspected as much."

"How?"

"From your actions, your feelings."

"Well, is there any advice you might give me, seeing as you're familiar with these matters?"

She stared into his eyes.

"Run away," she said. "Go back to your ship, to the sea. Forget it."

"I've come this far," he answered.

She reached out and brushed her fingertips across his forehead as the music moved them nearer.

"Already the mark of death is beginning to appear upon your brow. Do as I say."

He smiled crookedly.

"You're a lovely lady, and mayhap a bit jealous of your skills—or fearful of what may happen should I gain a few myself. As I say, I've come this far, and I've a fair wind at my back. It's more to the setting of the sails I'd be concerned."

"In that case," she replied, "I can only give you a general caution: Be wary of what you may be presented to eat or drink."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

He smiled again.

"After a meal like this, that should be no problem. I'll be remembering you, and we may get together yet."

She blushed again and looked away.

Later, as the music drew to a close, he took her hand and led her back to the table for a sweet and a final round of wine.

* * *

When they had finished and were retiring, Dilvish felt a tugging at his sleeve as he followed the others from the hall. Turning, he saw that it was the old man who had sat by the fire.

"Good evening to you," Dilvish said.

"Good evening, sir. Tell me, are you going to be leaving now?"

Dilvish shook his head.

"We will be staying the night, leaving in the morning. Did you wish to travel with us?"

"No, merely to repeat my caution."

"What do you know that I don't?" Dilvish asked.

"I am not a philosopher, to answer such a thing," the man stated, taking hold of his staff, turning and limping off toward the kitchen.

❖ ❖ ❖

…There was Jelerak, leaning above the sacrifice. Dilvish advanced upon him, blade in hand, kicking aside magical paraphernalia, cursing, rushing to the aid of the victim. Only…only now he was not rushing. He felt his limbs grow heavy, his movements slow. When he looked into the hate-filled eyes of the shadowy figure hovering before him, he looked past his own clenched fist, unnaturally whitened, grown stonelike in response to the clipped words that had summoned the forces that fell upon him like a torrent, constricting his insides, slowing his heartbeat… He swayed, he halted and grew numb—except for his spinal column, which seemed to be afire. Something was wrenching at his consciousness and a faint, gibbering voice reached him through a sound like a roaring wind. It felt as if he were being torn out of his body…

He was being shaken. He raised his hands and lowered them again. The panic began to recede as he realized that he was in bed.

"It's all right," Reena was saying. "A dream, a bad dream… It's all right."

"Yes," Dilvish finally said, rubbing his eyes. "Yes…"

He dropped his hands, patted her thigh.

"Thanks," he said. "Sorry to wake you."

"Go back to sleep," she answered.

"What is that?"

"What?"

"To the right," he said softly. "Look at the door."

There was a long pause, then: "I don't see it…"

"Neither do I."

He swung his feet to the floor, rose, and crossed the room. He halted near the place where the doorway should have been. He reached out and touched the wall, pressed upon it. He ran his fingertips along the stone. He moved from one corner to the other.

"It's not just a trick of the darkness," he said. "There is no door."

"Magic?" she said. "Or masonry?"

"I can't tell, and it doesn't matter," he replied. "Either way, we're prisoners. Get up and get dressed. Get your things together."

"Why?"

"Why? I'm going to try to get us out of here."

He moved across the room toward the narrow window.

"Wait! Are you certain it would be wise, even if you can find a way?"

"Yes," he replied. "When someone makes me a prisoner, I am certain that it is better not to remain one."

"But no attempt has been made to harm us—"

"Yet," he said. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"It might be more dangerous outside than it is in here."

"Why do you say that?"

"Something is going on out there tonight. Something dangerous, I believe, from—hints—I got when I was talking with Reynar. I feel safe here. Why don't we just wait—until morning?"

"I will not be controlled," Dilvish stated, "if there is something I can do about it."

He leaned his head into the narrow window and shouted:

"Black! I need you! We're walled into this room! Come to me!"

There was movement within the well of shadow below and to his right. Moonlight touching its eyes to fire, the dark horse shape advanced several paces and halted. Abruptly it threw back its head and emitted a wailing note that caused Dilvish to draw away from the aperture.

"Black! What is it! What's the matter?" he cried.

"Just burned myself," came the reply. "Someone's encircled me. Can you break it from there?"

"I don't think so. Wait a minute."

He turned toward the bed.

"Someone's bound Black—" he began.

"I heard," she said. "I can't loosen it from here."

"All right."

He located his clothing and began dressing.

"What are you going to do?"

"It'll be a bit of a squeeze, but I believe I can get through that window."

"Those are flagstones down there."

He picked up a blanket and knotted it about the nearest bedpost.

"We've enough linen to get me far enough down to drop. Get the basin and soak it all. It's stronger that way. I don't think the bed can be moved, though… No, it won't budge."

He finished knotting the bedclothes together and slung his blade over his back. He raised the damp line and cast it out the window.

"All right. I'm going now," he said, kicking over a stool and mounting it. "Get ready. I'll be back for you shortly."

"But how—"

"Just do it."

He was already edging his way through the window. He had to pause to unsling his blade, holding it in one hand and the line in the other. He stopped, exhaled heavily, and resumed pushing himself to the left, slowly, feeling the stone grate across his backbone. Expelling more breath, he continued to slip sideways, his sternum also scraping slowly past the narrowest portion of the window. A cold night wind fell upon his face as he came free and reslung the blade over his back. Taking the line into both hands, he began his descent.

His Elfboots found purchase where others might have slipped. Leaning heavily, straining his arms, he backed down the wall. He paused to wipe his hands one by one as he descended, his weight wringing moisture from the taut cloth. He looked up once, looked down several times. The moon, climbing toward midheaven, cast a milky film upon the still courtyard beneath him and the grainy wall upon which he trod.

His intention when he reached the end of the line was to hang suspended at arm's length before dropping the remaining distance. However, his hands slipped free before he could achieve this position. As he tumbled backward, he felt his body jerked about, repositioned with respect to the ground, his charmed boots calling upon the forces necessary to assure his landing upon his feet.

He bent his knees. He threw himself forward into a roll as soon as he struck, his ankles still taking a heavy jolt upon the unyielding surface.

He rose quickly and buckled on his sword belt in a more traditional fashion, looking about, listening the while for any indications of approaching danger. Save for the wind and his own heavy breathing, however, he heard nothing. Nor did he see anything out of the ordinary.

He moved across the courtyard quickly and stood before Black.

"Who did it?" he asked.

"I don't know. I wasn't even aware that I was bound until I attempted to depart. Had I known what was going on, I certainly wouldn't have waited here for them to finish it. I can refresh you on the loosening procedure if you do not recall—"

"It takes too long," said Dilvish. "Since I can do a few things you can't, I'm simply going to break the circle and bring you out."

"It will be painful. It's a strong one."

Dilvish chuckled softly.

"Whatever, I've felt worse."

He moved forward, feeling first a tingling, then a fiery pain as he neared his mount. He paused for a moment in its midst and it rose to an agonizing peak, as if his entire body were burning inside and out, his head swimming. Then it began to subside. He reached out and touched Black with both hands.

"I've drained off the worst of it," he said, and he mounted. "Let's go!"

Black began to move. There was a tingling sensation, and then they were crossing the courtyard, heading toward the main entrance. Moments later they were through it.

"Up that stairway!" Dilvish said, and Black sprang forward, hooves clattering. "To the right and around when you reach the top. Then up the next stair."

Large standing candles flickered as they passed, tapestries flapped, hanging weapons chattered against stone walls.

"Turn right here"—at the top of the second stair. "Turn again—right. Slow now…Near the middle of the corridor. Hold it!"

Dilvish slid down and approached the wall, placing his hands flat upon it.

"It was here," he said. "Right about here—the door. Reena!"

"Yes"—faintly—from beyond the wall.

"I don't know what they did with it," Dilvish said. "But we need another one."

"I've a feeling," Black said slowly, "that the original one is still there, somewhere—that you were trapped by an illusion. But it is only a feeling, and I can't detect it either now. So we will start from scratch, so to speak."

Black reared, casting a giant shadow. As he did, there followed the first silence since they had entered the building. Through it, beyond it, Dilvish thought that he heard voices and footsteps, coming from the vicinity of the stair. No one was in sight, however, and moments later the nearer silence was shattered as Black's forelegs descended to strike against the wall.

Dilvish drew back as chips of stone flew about the hallway. Already Black was rearing again. His second blow struck sparks from the stone. The third time that he lunged a crack appeared within the wall.

A group of servants entered the corridor, clubs in their hands. They halted as Black rose up and struck again.

The woman, Andra, moved forward, calling to him.

"You said that the metal beast would not move!" she cried.

"…And I meant it—until I was made a prisoner," he answered.

Black crashed against the wall once again. Stone shattered and fell away. A head-sized hole appeared.

After several moments' hesitation, the servants—four men and two women—began to advance. Dilvish drew his blade. Black's next assault upon the wall tripled the size of the opening.

Dilvish moved toward the approaching servants. He lowered the point of his blade and drew it across the floor.

"I'll dismember the first person who crosses that line," he stated.

From behind him there came another crash and the sound of more falling masonry.

The advancing figures hesitated, halted. Black's next blow seemed to cause the entire castle to shudder.

"I'm through," he said simply, backing away from the opening.

"Reena?" Dilvish inquired, not moving his eyes from his muttering adversaries.

"Yes." Her voice was clear and near.

"Mount," he said. "We're getting out of here."

"Yes."

Dilvish heard the movements behind him. Then Black's shadow slid forward. He glanced up, mounted quickly behind Reena.

"Better get out of the way!" he announced. "We're coming through!"

He brandished his blade.

"Take us away," he said to Black, and they began to move forward.

The six figures pressed back against the wall to let them pass. They held their weapons at ready but made no attempt to use them as Black went by. They stared without expression and glanced back along the dust-filled hallway. Dilvish looked back, also, as Black made the first turn toward the stair. The doorway had reappeared, about two feet beyond the new opening in the wall.

Moments later they were moving down the stair. Nothing barred their way. They left the keep to find the courtyard still deserted. Crossing it, they saw that the portcullis was raised.

"Strange…" Dilvish remarked, gesturing.

"Perhaps," Reena said, as Black increased his pace and they rushed through. "I have your cloak here…"

"Hang onto it till we're farther away. Black, when you hit yesterday's trail, go left."

"The horses…" Reena said. "The other things…"

"I'm not about to go back for them."

Black began to climb, beneath a high moon. The cold winds caught at them as they passed, and at a great distance some creature barked, howled, and grew still. Reena looked back once at the castle, shuddered, then rested in the circle of Dilvish's arms.

"You are going to die, you know," she said. "He is going to kill you. You haven't a chance."

"Who?" he said.

"Jelerak. There is no way you will ever be able to destroy someone like that."

"Quite possible," Dilvish said, "but I have to try."

"Why?"

"He has done a lot of harm and he will do more unless someone stops him."

They reached the trail and Black bore them to the left, still mounting.

"There has always been evil in the world and there always will be. Why should you take it upon yourself to purge it?"

"Because I have seen his at closer range than most who live."

"And I am another who has. But I know that there is nothing I can do about it."

"We differ," he replied.

"I do not believe that it is a desire to do the world a good turn that drives you. It is hate and revenge."

"There is that, too."

"Only that, I think."

Dilvish was silent for a time. Then: "You could be right," he said. "I like to think that there is more to it than that. But I suppose that you could be right."

"It will warp you and ruin you, even if he does not destroy you. Perhaps it already has."

"I need it for now. It serves me. It gives me an edge. When its object has been removed, it will go, too."

"In the meantime, it leaves small room for anything else—like love."

Dilvish straightened slightly.

"I've room for many other feelings, only they must be subordinated for now."

"If I asked you to stay with me, would you?"

"For a time, I think."

"But only for a time?"

"That is all anyone can really promise."

"Supposing I asked you to take me with you?"

"I'd say no."

"Why? I could be of some help."

"I would not risk you. As I said, I've room for other feelings."

She rested her head upon his biceps for a moment.

"Here's your cloak," she finally said. "It's cold. We must be far enough away…"

"Hold it, Black. Stay a minute."

They began to slow.

* * *

He had watched Oele dance for Devil with a growing feeling of panic, there before the dark heap of stones with the silver dagger atop it, cup clutched in his hand, seeing the bright design occur on the ground about her, feeling the cold wind.

"Drink it all," she had told him. "It is a part of the ritual."

Reena's words came back to him as he looked down into the steaming cup. He had raised it and pretended to sip as Oele spun away into her dance. He had sniffed. It looked like mulled wine, but there was a peculiar odor to it. He had touched the moist rim with his tongue and known a bitter taste. When Oele was faced in his direction, he threw back his head and raised the cup as if he were draining it. When Oele faced away, he dashed it over his shoulder into the darkness.

Scheming bitch! he thought. She's not about to give you anything. My lovely Reena was right. I'd wager you're the sacrifice for something she wants. Let's just play at getting sleepy and see what happens next. Bitch!

He placed the cup on the ground and leaned upon the altar, watching the bright design become more elaborate. It was almost hypnotic, the way that she moved. Another man might have bolted and run, having reached the same conclusion as Reynar, but he had been sufficient to every occasion that brought him danger in the course of a very active life. He smiled as he watched Oele's form flowing beneath her light gray garment, remembering to yawn whenever she turned in his direction. Sad…He'd liked her more than most.

Then the panic had begun. A chill, out of all proportion with the wind and the night, crept across his neck, his shoulders. It was as if someone were standing right behind him, regarding him intently. He judged that he might be able to snatch up the dagger as he turned and defend himself adequately, keeping the altar between himself and his abrupt companion. Yet…He had never before felt himself an object of scrutiny with such intense accompaniments. The mere regard of a stranger had never caused a tingling in the hands, a tightening of the stomach, an absolute certainty of presence. Weakness invaded his limbs as he tried to tear his gaze from Oele's concluding movements to turn and consider the visitor.

You seek to defraud the priestess, came words like drops of blood into his mind, *and by so doing, you would cheat me.*

Who are you? he asked within himself, toward the other.

That you shall never know.

He leaned heavily upon the altar, using all of his strength to turn partway toward the presence, the edge of something absolutely black coming into his field of vision. A force seeming to emanate from it clamped down upon him with even greater firmness then, keeping him from turning any farther. He knew that he could never reach the dagger on the stone—and even if he could, that it would be of small avail against the thing that held him.

He slumped, as if totally drained, his left hand catching at the edge of the stone, his right falling loosely along his side. As he leaned farther forward, he saw that Oele was slowing, that what might be the final steps of the figures were bringing her closer to him. The moon, he had noted, was now almost directly overhead. He still felt the presence beyond the altar, but now its attention seemed nowhere near as intense as it had been moments before. He wondered whether it was communicating with Oele.

As he leaned just a little more, he kept his eyes focused upon her approaching form. Finally she halted, only a few paces away. The dance was finished. He had let his eyelids droop, his breathing deepen. But she was paying him no heed. Her attention appeared to be devoted to something beyond him.

He waited, wondering just how subdued he might really be, afraid to test it. The earlier panic had passed, to be replaced by the controlled tension, the heightened alertness that always came upon him at times of crisis.

Oele seemed to be speaking, though he could not hear the words, and then pausing as if listening, though he could not hear any replies. Finally she moved, passing before him with barely a glance, reaching out, taking up the dagger from the stony surface.

Then she turned toward him, her left hand moving as if to catch hold of his hair.

"Bitch!" he hissed, his right hand drawing the knife from his boot sheath and thrusting it forward and upward as he straightened, even as he felt the chilling power from behind the altar striving to control him once again.

The expression upon Oele's face was one of surprise. Her cry was brief and she slumped almost instantly, the sacrificial dagger slipping from her fingers.

He caught her as she fell, turned and cast her body back atop the altar.

"Here's your blood!" he snarled. "Take it and be damned with you!"

He held the knife before him and took a step backward, expecting a supernatural retaliation at any moment. It did not follow. The dark presence remained beyond the form of his bleeding lover and he felt its scrutiny, but it made no effort to control him or to strike at him.

Finding that his strength was with him once more, he took another step backward and began glancing about him, seeking the safest avenue of flight.

"Sailor, sailor," came the voice which now seemed audible across the windy night. "Where are you going?"

"Away from this damned place!" he answered.

"Why did you come?"

He gestured with his blade.

"She'd promised me powers like her own."

"Then why do you flee?"

"She lied."

"But I do not. You can still have them."

"How? Why? What do you mean?"

"Two routes lie before me, and I am more loath to give up this world than I had realized. I am not entirely pleased by this, but this is the case. Look back upon the castle from which you have come. It is yours if you want it, and everything in it. Or, if you bid me, it will vanish in the next instant, and I will raise you another place of your own desire—or not, as you would. You may have what she had—anything you want that I can give you—for I find myself in need of you."

"In what way?"

"She was my link to this plane of existence. I require a worshipper here in order to focus my energies in this world. She was the last. Now my presence will weaken here until I must retire to the places of the Old Ones. Unless I find a new worshipper."

"Me?"

"Yes. Serve me and I will serve you."

"…And if I say 'no'?"

There was a pause. Then: "I will not try to stop you. Perhaps I was actually finished with this place a long while ago and cling now only because of certain perceptions it affords me. I will not try to stop you."

Reynar laughed.

"Now, with so many things I'm wanting, I'd be a fool to turn down your offer, wouldn't I? You've just acquired an acolyte, a priest, a devotee—or whatever it takes. What say you grant me whatever powers the homicidal lady possessed and give me some quick instruction in the articles of the faith. There's a little filly I'd be riding before the night is through."

"Then put aside your weapon, sailor, and approach the altar…"

* * *

Dismounted, Dilvish and Reena were donning warmer clothing when Dilvish saw a figure approaching down the slope of a low hill ahead and to his right.

"Someone coming," he said to Reena, who immediately looked back in the direction of the castle.

"No. From over there," he said, gesturing. "We'd best be moving along."

He finished tying the parcel of their belongings and moved to help Reena to mount.

"Ho! Dilvish!" came a cry from the advancing figure. "Reena!"

They hesitated, staring through the night. Then the moonlight touched the approaching form.

"Wait up a bit! We've something to discuss!"

Black turned his head.

"I don't like this," he said. "Let's go."

Dilvish moved around him.

"I'm not afraid of Reynar," he answered.

For a moment he watched the man striding down the slope.

"What is it?" he called then. "What do you want?"

Reynar halted, perhaps twenty paces away.

"Want? Just the girl. Just Reena," he answered. "Unless you want to try being a statue again. We have an understanding."

Dilvish looked back.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"No—yes—no..." she answered.

"We seem to have a little confusion on this end," Dilvish called to Reynar. "I don't understand the situation."

"Ask her to tell you what happened to the door," the other said.

Dilvish looked again. Reena looked away.

"Well...?" he said. "I'd like to know."

"It was my doing," she finally stated. "One of my better spells. To everyone else, the door had vanished. I could have walked out through it."

"Why? And how did he know about it?"

"Well...I told him that that was what I was going to do. In fact, I had just finished laying the spell when you awoke. That kept me from doing the second one."

"Second one? Of what sort?"

"A sleep spell. To keep you there while I did whatever I decided to do."

"I'm afraid I'm still lost. What were you deciding?"

"To run away with me," Reynar shouted down. "To teach me to use my new powers properly."

"Then I'm in the way," Dilvish said. "Why didn't you just tell me? I have no claim on you. I—"

"I said that I was deciding!" she almost snarled. "It would have been so easy if you had just stayed asleep!"

"Next time I'll know better."

"But I did decide! None of this should even have come up. I don't want to go with him. I want to continue as we were."

Dilvish smiled.

"Then there is no problem. Sorry, Reynar. The lady has made her choice. Let's go, Reena."

"Wait," Reynar said softly. "The decision, you see, is mine."

Dilvish looked to see a bright spark appear in the air high above the hilltop. It raced toward Reynar's extended right hand, growing as it approached. When it arrived, he held a cold blue ball of light that he drew back beyond his shoulder.

"You," he said to Dilvish, "have became extra baggage."

The globe flew from his hand. Dilvish attempted to dodge it, but it curved to follow him. It struck him full upon the breast, rebounded, and hit the ground some eight feet before him and to the left, where it exploded into a brilliant fountain of sparks, leaving a smoking hole in the earth.

Dilvish rushed forward. Reynar raised both hands and began gesturing with them.

Dilvish felt as if he were barely missing being buffeted. It was as if a series of gusts of gale force wind were breaking all about him, passing… He continued on up the slope, now able to make out the puzzled expression on the sailor's face.

"Devil lied to me," he said. "You should have been dead by now."

Dilvish's eyes went past him, to the low outline of the altar, Oele's body atop it, small and pale in the moonlight.

"Black!" he cried, as he began to understand. "Destroy that altar up ahead!"

Moments later he heard the sound of metal hooves. Reynar spun, pointing, and a line of flame raced from his extended finger, striking Black upon the left shoulder as he passed them by. The area reddened. But Black continued on his course without slowing, nothing in his movements even indicating an awareness of the effect.

Reynar spun to face Dilvish, stooping to rise with his blade in his hand.

"If the magic won't take you," he said, "here's something better."

Dilvish's own blade, four times the length of the other's, sighed into his hand. He moved forward to engage the other.

Reynar's fingers twitched, and his left hand described a sweeping gesture.

The blade was torn free of Dilvish's grip, spinning high into the air where it passed from sight.

"So it's only your person that is proof against the power," Reynar announced as he lunged.

Dilvish raised his cloak before him, twisting his left arm within it as he did so. The blade tore through the fabric a foot below his forearm. He pushed forward and downward as this occurred, at the same time drawing his own knife with his right hand and thrusting across with it.

Reynar recovered quickly, disengaging his own weapon, as Dilvish's blade struck his shoulder and ground on bone before it withdrew again. Crouching low then, they moved to circle one another. Reynar's left hand made a quick sweeping movement, and again Dilvish felt as if a mighty wind had passed him, though only the trailing corner of his cloak was taken by it. He felt a warmth upon his breast, and something caught at the bottom of his vision.

For an instant he glanced downward. There, where it had come free of his shirt, the charm the old man had given him was glowing faintly. He shook the cloak as Reynar thrust again, baffling the blade and riposting immediately, though he slashed only air, for the sailor had retreated nimbly. In the distance he heard the first crashing blow as Black struck at the altar.

Reynar's eyes had widened the moment they had rested upon the glowing amulet, as if some suspicion had at that instant been born. They were narrowed now, however, as he moved rapidly, almost too rapidly, to Dilvish's left. Dilvish half anticipated the stumble and quick recovery that followed. When that left hand moved again, it was not magic but a handful of dirt that was cast toward his face.

Loath to lower the cloak, Dilvish shielded his eyes with his right forearm and twisted to the side, knowing that an attack would follow immediately. Reynar's knife grazed across his ribs on the left side. Hand still high, unable to gain a thrusting position in time, he brought the pommel of his weapon down upon the shoulder he had cut earlier. He heard a sharp intake of breath from the other and attempted to grapple with him. But Reynar pushed him away and danced back, tossing the blade from his right hand to his left, springing forward and slashing with it.

Dilvish felt the cut across the back of his hand as he heard Black strike at the altar stones again. He riposted, but Reynar was already out of range. Both their glances were momentarily drawn by a faint reddish light upon the hilltop, haloing Black and the altar.

Reynar raised his right hand, pointing at Dilvish as he had at Black earlier. The flame leaped toward his breast, struck in the vicinity of the glowing amulet, and veered away as if reflected from a mirror. Reynar immediately followed this with another attack with his blade.

He rushed and came in low. Dilvish struck the blade down. Reynar straightened suddenly then and his right hand shot forward, seizing the charm and jerking hard upon it.

The strand parted and Reynar retreated, bearing it away with him.

Above them the red glow brightened as Black reared once more, very slowly, as if struggling against some opposing force.

"Now let's see how you fare!" Reynar cried, and the fires danced at his fingertips, spread, and coalesced into a sword of flame.

As he stepped forward, the light flickered and died on the hilltop to the accompaniment of a shattering sound. Rocks bounced past them as Dilvish retreated, flapping his cloak, his own blade held low.

Reynar's attack cut a large rent in the material. Dilvish continued to retreat, and as the other brandished the blazing weapon it began to fade, flickering once—twice—and was gone.

"The story of my life," Reynar remarked, shaking his head. "The good things always seem to melt away."

"Let's just call the damned thing off," Dilvish said. "Your power is broken."

"Perhaps you're right," Reynar answered, lowering his remaining blade and taking a step forward.

He was standing uphill of Dilvish, and suddenly he dropped, sliding downward, his left foot hooking behind the heel of Dilvish's extended right leg, his right foot striking Dilvish below the kneecap, straightening, pushing.

As Dilvish toppled backward, Reynar was already recovering. He sprang forward as soon as he had, blade upraised, casting himself down toward the other's supine form.

Dilvish shook his head clear as Reynar launched himself, rolled once, and twisted. He blocked with his right arm as he moved his left into position. He felt Reynar stiffen as he struck the ground beside him, impaling himself upon the blade Dilvish had transferred. He held off Reynar's knife hand until the strength went out of it. Then he rose to one knee and turned the man over onto his back.

The sailor's face twisted in the moonlight.

"Leaping and not looking again…" he muttered. "It's finally caught up with me… Ow! that smarts! Don't be pulling it out—till after I'm gone, will you?"

Dilvish shook his head.

"—sorry I ever met her!"

Dilvish did not ask to whom he referred.

"I don't know—why he should have given me the power—you the protection…"

"I met a man not too long ago," Dilvish replied, "who was possessed of two very different minds in the one body. And I've heard of others. If it can be so with a man, then why not a god?"

"Devil," Reynar stated.

"Perhaps the distinction between the two is not so sharp as men would think—especially when times grow hard. I knew this place long ago. It was different."

"The devil with them all, Dilvish the damned! The devil with them all!"

Something went out of him and Reynar slumped, his face finally loosening.

Dilvish withdrew his blade and cleaned it. Only then did he look up at Black, who had approached noiselessly and stood watching. Reena stood farther away, weeping.

"Your sword fell over there," Black said, turning his head back and to his right. "I passed it on the way down."

"Thanks," said Dilvish, rising.

"…And the castle is gone. I noticed that on the way down, too."

Dilvish turned and stared.

"I wonder what became of our horses?"

"They are wandering below. I can fetch them."

"Do it, then."

Black turned and moved off.

Dilvish walked over to Reena.

"Can't dig here," he said. "I'll have to use rocks."

Reena nodded. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder.

"You couldn't have foreseen all this."

"I saw more than I realized," she said. "I wish now I'd realized more—or seen less."

She turned away and his hand slipped from her shoulder. He went to fetch the other blade.

* * *

They had traveled this night until they came to a rocky bay free of the winds, near to the edge of the snowline, just above the point where the trail began its downward twisting toward the plains and springtime. There they sheltered and slept, the horses roped in at the rear of the windbreak behind them, Black as still as a piece of the landscape farther ahead.

Dilvish stirred from his sleep as the sky grew pink in the east. His wounds throbbing dully, he sat up and drew on his boots. Neither Reena nor Black stirred as he passed, heading toward the skin-clad figure with the staff at the right of the trail.

"Good morning," he said softly.

The old man nodded.

"I want to thank you for the charm. It saved my life."

"I know."

"Why did you do it?"

"You once made an offering to Taksh'mael."

"That is so important?"

"You are the last to remember his name."

"Don't you count?"

"I cannot qualify as a worshipper, save in the most narcissistic sense."

Dilvish looked at him once again. The figure seemed taller, nobler, and there was that in his eyes which caused him to look instantly away—a sense of unearthly depth, a power.

"I am going now," he continued. "It was not easy to free myself from this place. Come, walk with me a way."

He turned and moved upward without looking back. Dilvish followed him toward the fringes of the snow, his breath steaming before him.

"Is it a good place to which you go?"

"I like to think so. I heard you earlier. It is true that anyone can be of—two minds. Now I am of but one, and I owe you thanks for that."

Dilvish blew upon his hands and rubbed them together as the landscape grew white about them.

"At the moment, I am possessed of more power than I need. Is there anything I can give you?"

"Could you give me the life of a sorcerer named Jelerak?"

Ahead, he saw the other's stride falter for a moment.

Then: "No" came the reply. "I do know of this one, but what you ask would be no easy thing. It would take more than I have to give. He is not easily dealt with."

"I know. It is said that he is the best."

"Yet there exists at least one who might destroy him on his own terms."

"And who might that be?"

"The one of whom you spoke earlier. Ridley is his name."

"Ridley is dead."

"No. Jelerak defeated him but had not the strength to destroy him. So he imprisoned him beneath the fallen Tower of Ice, whence he planned to return when he regained his strength, there to finish the work."

"That doesn't sound too promising."

"But he cannot do it."

"Why not?"

"Their conflict drew the attention of the greatest sorcerers in the world. For ages have they sought a weapon against Jelerak. When he departed without succeeding in destroying his enemy, they combined their forces to lay a magical barrier about the broken tower, a barrier not even Jelerak can penetrate. Now they have their surety. If he ever presses them too hard, they can threaten to lift it, to release Ridley."

"And Ridley would destroy him the next time?"

"I do not know. But he would have more of a chance than most."

"Could I release Ridley, unaided?"

"I doubt it."

"Could you do it?"

"I fear that I must be going now. Sorry."

He gestured toward the east where the sun was beginning its ascent. Dilvish looked in that direction, to where it parted the clouds like scarlet curtains. When he looked back, the other was far above him, climbing with an amazing speed and agility across the sparkling snowface. Even as Dilvish watched, he rounded a rocky shoulder and passed out of sight.

"Wait!" he cried. "I've more things to ask you!"

Ignoring his assorted pains, Dilvish began to climb, following the other's trail. Before long he noticed that the rough prints grew farther and farther apart, yet paradoxically were shallower and shallower, until, rounding the shoulder, he found only one, very faint.

The following afternoon, they rode out of the mountains. He did not tell Reena about Ridley.

❖ ❖ ❖

In the high place, when the moon is full, the witch-fires rise and the ghost of the girl Oele dances before the shattered altar, though no Devil comes, but sometimes there is the form of another watching from the shadows. When the final stone is fallen, he would bear her off to the sea.

A Word from Zelazny

Zelazny wrote this Dilvish tale after "Garden of Blood," but its action precedes "Garden of Blood" in the sequence of *Dilvish, the Damned.* Zelazny said[1] that it had been scheduled for magazine publication, but instead its first publication was in *Dilvish, the Damned.*

Notes

A **geegaw** is a trinket. **Ramparts** are fortifications consisting of an embankment with a **parapet** (defensive wall) built on top. **Riposted** means delivered a quick counter-stroke. **Widdershins** is counter-clockwise or a contrary direction. A **belaying pin** is a short metal or wooden rod used on a ship to secure rope. The **portcullis** in a castle's gateway is an iron grating lowered to prevent passage. **Décolleté** suggests a strapless dress designed to accentuate cleavage. **Glamourie** means magically enhanced beauty and sex appeal. **Stalagmites** form on cavern's floor. **Surety** is a guarantee.

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[1] *Alternities #6,* Vol 2 No 2, Summer 1981.

GARDEN OF BLOOD

Sorcerer's Apprentice #3, Summer 1979.
§ *Dilvish* 10 of 11

Earning his passage and pay as a scout, Dilvish rode on ahead of the caravan that day, checking the pass-worthiness of mountain trails and investigating side ways for possible hazards. The sun had reached midday when he descended the far side of the low Kalgani range and moved through the foothills into the widening valley opening into the wood beyond which lay the plains.

"A singularly uneventful passage," Black commented, as they paused upon a hilltop to regard the twisting of the trail toward the distant trees.

"In my day," said Dilvish, "things would probably have been different. This area was full of robber bands. They followed the sun. They preyed upon travelers. Occasionally they would even join together to raid one of the small towns hereabout."

"Towns?" said his great, dark mount whose skin shimmered like metal. "I have seen no towns."

Dilvish shook his head.

"Who knows what might have happened in two hundred years?" He gestured downward. "I believe there was one right below us. Not large. It was called Tregli. I stayed at its inn on several occasions."

Black looked in that direction.

"Are we going down there?"

Dilvish glanced at the sun.

"It is lunchtime," he observed, "and the winds are strong here. Let's go a little farther. I'll eat down below."

Black leaned forward and began descending the slope, picking up speed as the land leveled, making his way back onto the trail. Dilvish looked about him as they went, as if seeking landmarks.

"What are those flashes of color?" Black asked him. "Some distance ahead."

Dilvish regarded a small area of blue, yellow, white—with an occasional flash of red—that had just come into view around a far-off bend.

"I don't know," he said. "We might take a look."

Several minutes later, they passed the vine-covered remains of a low stone wall. Ahead lay strewn stones in patterns vaguely reminiscent of the outline of a building's foundation. Here and there, as they advanced, they noted depressions at either hand, disposed in such fashion as to indicate that here might have been cellars, now rubble-filled and overgrown.

"Hold," Dilvish said, pointing ahead and to his left to a place where a section of wall still stood. "That is the front of the inn I mentioned. I'm sure of it. I think we are on the main street."

"Really?"

Black began to dig at the turf with one sharp, cloven foot. Moments later a spark flashed as he struck a cobblestone. He widened the hole, to reveal more cobbles adjoining it.

"This does appear to have been a street," he said.

Dilvish dismounted and walked to the crumbling section of wall, passed it, moved about in the area behind it.

After several minutes he returned.

"The old well is still in sight out back," he said. "But its canopy's collapsed and rotted, and it's covered over with vines now."

"Might I suggest you save your thirst for that stream we passed in the hills?"

Dilvish held up a spoon.

"…And I found this part-buried where the kitchen used to be. I might have eaten with it myself, years ago. Yes, this is the inn."

"Was," Black suggested.

Dilvish's smile vanished and he nodded.

"True."

He tossed the spoon back over his shoulder and mounted.

"So much has changed…"

"You liked it here?" Black asked as they moved forward again.

"It was a pleasant stopping place. The people were friendly. I had some good meals."

"What do you think might have happened? Those robbers you mentioned?"

"Seems a good guess," Dilvish replied. "Unless it was some disease."

They moved along the overgrown trail, a rabbit starting before them as they passed toward the far end of the town.

"Where did you want to take your meal?" Black inquired.

"Away from this dead place," Dilvish said. "Perhaps in that field ahead." He drew a deep breath. "It seems to have a pleasant smell to it."

"It's the flowers," Black said. "Full of them. It was their colors we saw from above. Weren't they there—in the old days?"

Dilvish shook his head.

"No. There was something…I don't quite recall what. Sort of a parklike little area out this way."

They passed through a grove of trees, came into the clearing. Large, poppylike blossoms, blue, white, yellow—the occasional red—moved almost as high as Black's shoulder, swaying on hairy, finger-thick stalks. They faced the sun. Their heavy perfumes hung in the air.

"There is a clear, shaded area at the foot of that large tree—to the left," Black observed. "There even seems to be a table you could use."

Dilvish looked in that direction.

"Aha!" he said. "Now I remember. That stone slab isn't a table. Well…In a way, it is. It's an altar. The people of Tregli worshipped out here in the open—Manata, goddess of growing things. They left her cakes and honey and such on the altar. Danced here. Sang here, of an evening. I even came to one of the services. They had a priestess…I forget her name."

They came up beneath the tree, where Dilvish dismounted.

"The tree has grown and the altar's sunk," he remarked, brushing debris from the stone.

He began to hum as he rummaged in a saddlebag after a meal—a simple, repetitive tune.

"I've never before heard you sing, whistle, or hum," Black commented.

Dilvish yawned.

"I was just trying to recall the tune I heard that evening I was here. I believe that's how it went."

He seated himself with his back against the bole of the tree and began to eat.

"Dilvish, there is something strange about this place…"

"It seems strange to me just by virtue of its having changed so," he replied, breaking off a piece of bread.

The wind shifted. The odors of the flowers came to them more strongly.

"That is not what I mean."

Dilvish swallowed and smothered another yawn.

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

Black lowered his head and ceased all movement.

Dilvish looked about him and listened for a long while. The only sounds, however, were the rustling of the grasses, the flowers, the leaves in the tree above him, stirred by a passing wind.

"There does not seem to be anything unusual about," he said softly.

Black did not reply.

Dilvish regarded his mount.

"Black?"

Carefully he loosened his blade and gathered his feet beneath him. He moved the balance of his lunch over to the slab.

"Black!"

The creature stood unmoving, unspeaking, like a great, dark statue.

Dilvish rose to his feet, stumbled, leaned back against the tree. His breathing came heavy.

"Is it you, my enemy?" he asked. "Why don't you show yourself?"

There came no reply. He looked out across the field again, breathing the heady perfume of the flowers. His vision began to waver as he stared, smearing the colors, distorting the outlines.

"What is happening?"

He took a step forward, and another, staggering in Black's direction. When he reached him, he threw an arm about his neck and leaned heavily. Suddenly he drew his shirt upward with his left hand and pressed his face into it.

"Is it a narcotic…?" he said, and then he sagged, slipping partway to the ground.

Black still did not move.

* * *

There were cries in the darkness and loud voices shouting orders. Dilvish stood in the shadow of the trees; a giant, heavily built man with a curly beard stood motionless nearby. The two of them peered in the direction of the flickering lights.

"The whole town seems to be burning," came the deep voice of the larger man.

"Yes, and it sounds as if those who follow the sun are butchering the inhabitants."

"We can do no good here. There are too many of them. We would only get ourselves hacked to bits, also."

"True, and I had looked forward to a quiet evening. Let us skirt the place and be on our way."

They drew back farther into the shadows and made their way past the scene of carnage. The screams were fewer now, as the number of dead increased. Many of the men were stacking loot and drinking from bottles taken from the flaming inn. A few still stood in line where the remaining women lay disheveled, eyes wide, garments rent. Across the way, a roof suddenly collapsed, sending a fountain of sparks into the night air.

"If a few should stagger our way, though," the curly haired man remarked as they passed, "let's hang them by their heels and gut them, to square accounts somewhat with the gods."

"Keep your eyes open. You may get lucky."

The other chuckled.

"I never know when you're joking," he said after a time. "Maybe you never are. That can be funny, too—for others."

They moved along a rocky, brush-strewn declivity paralleling the town. At their left, the cries grew fainter. An occasional burst of flame still sent shadows dancing about them.

"I wasn't joking," Dilvish said a little later. "Maybe I've forgotten how."

The other touched his shoulder.

"Up ahead. The clearing…" he said.

They halted.

"Yes, I remember…"

"There is something there."

They began to move again, more slowly. A regular flickering of light, as from a number of torches, came from the farther end of the field in the vicinity of a large, heavy-limbed tree.

Drawing nearer, they saw a knot of men at the small stone altar. One of them sat upon it, drinking from a wine bottle. Two others were bringing a blond-haired girl in a green garment across the field, her hands bound behind her back. She spoke, but her words were indistinguishable. She struggled, and they pushed her. She fell, and they drew her to her feet again.

"I recognize that girl," Dilvish said. "It's Sanya, their priestess. But—"

He raised his hands to his head, pressed them to his temples.

"But—what happened? How did I come to be here? It seems that I saw Sanya long, long ago…"

He turned and stared into his companion's face, taking hold of his arm.

"You," he said, "my friend… It seems I have known you for ages, yet—Forgive me…I cannot recall your name."

The other's brow tightened as his eyes narrowed.

"I—You call me Black," he said suddenly. "Yes—and this is not my customary form! I begin to remember… It was daytime, and this field was full of flowers. I believe that we slept… And the village! It was but a bare remnant—"

He shook his head.

"I do not know what happened—what spell, what power brought us to this place."

"Yet you have powers of your own," Dilvish said. "Can they help us? Can you still use them?"

"I—I don't know. I seem to have forgotten—some things."

"If we die here—in this dream, or whatever it is—do we truly die? Can you divine that?"

"We—It is coming clearer now… The flowers of field sought our lives. The red ones are those that have slain travelers. They drug you with their perfumes, then twine about you and draw out your life. Yet something has interfered with their attempt on us. This is not a dream. We are witnessing what actually occurred. I do not know whether we can change what has already happened. Yet we must be here for a reason."

"And can we die here?" Dilvish repeated.

"I am sure of it. Even I, if I fall in this place—though I can foresee all sorts of intriguing theological problems."

"Bugger them!" Dilvish said, and he began to move forward, making his way through the shadows around the edge of the clearing, heading toward the far end. "I believe they mean to sacrifice the priestess on the altar of her own goddess."

"Yes," Black said, moving silently behind him. "I don't like them, and we are both armed. What do you say? There's quite a number at the stone and two with the girl… But we should be able to get very close without being seen."

"I agree. Can you use that blade—this being an unfamiliar form and all?"

Black chuckled.

"It is not totally unfamiliar," he replied. "The two on the right will never know how they got to Hell. I suggest that you deal with the one on the end while I'm sending them on their way. Then dispatch that one to the left." He drew a long, double-handed blade soundlessly, holding it with one hand. "They may all be a bit drunk, too," he added. "That should help."

Dilvish drew his blade. They moved nearer.

"Say when," he whispered.

Black raised his weapon.

"Now!"

Black was little more than a blur in the flickering light. Even as Dilvish fell upon his man to slay him, a gory head bounced near his foot, and Black's second victim was already falling.

A great cry went up from the others as Dilvish tore his blade free from the body of the man he had slain and turned to face another. Black's blade descended again, hacking off a man's swordarm at the elbow, and his left foot flew forward, catching the man on the slab in the small of the back. Dilvish thought that he heard his spine snap as the man was hurled to the ground.

But now there were blades in the hands of the remaining men, and from across the field in the direction of the burning town there came a series of cries. From the side of his eye, Dilvish saw a number of figures rushing toward them, weapons in their hands.

He drove his second man several paces backward, beat his guard aside, kicked him in the kneecap, and cut halfway through his neck with a heavy blow.

He turned to cut at another who was coming fast upon him, noting that Black had brained one man against the side of the altar and skewered another with his long blade, raising him up off the ground with the force of his thrust. By now there were cries all around them.

He got inside his opponent's reach and used the guard of his weapon as a knuckle-duster against the man's jaw. He kicked him as he fell and ran the point of his blade into another's guard, severing fingers as he drew it back. The man screamed and dropped his weapon. Ducking a head cut, Dilvish swung low and cut another behind the knee, hamstringing him. He backed away from two more then and circled quickly, getting one into the other's way, beating and thrusting, being parried, parrying himself, thrusting again, slipping around a parry and slashing a wrist. From somewhere he heard Black bellow—a half-human, half-animal sound—followed moments later by a series of different voices screaming.

Dilvish tripped the injured man and stamped on him, caught the other in the stomach with his blade, felt a stinging in his shoulder, saw his own blood, turned to face a new attacker…

He dispatched this man in an almost dreamlike series of movements. Another, who was rushing toward him, slipped on a patch of freshly spilled blood and Dilvish finished him before he could rise again.

A club struck him on the side. He doubled for a moment and backed away, swinging wide parries. He saw Black nearby, still felling his attackers with almost reckless swordplay. He was about to call out to him, that they might get back to back for a more complete defense—

A sharp cry rang out and the attackers hesitated. Heads turned in the direction of the altar, and motion was frozen for a moment.

The priestess Sanya lay across the stone, bleeding. A tall, fair-haired man had just withdrawn a blade from her breast. Her lips were still moving, either in curse or prayer, but the words were inaudible. The man's lips were moving, too. Across the field a fresh group of men was advancing from the direction of the town. A red trickle began at the left corner of Sanya's mouth and her head suddenly slumped to the side, eyes still open, unseeing. The blond man raised his head.

"Now bring me those two!" he cried, raising his blade once more and pointing it toward Dilvish and Black.

As he did this, the man's sleeve fell back revealing a series of bluish tattoos along his right forearm. Dilvish had seen such markings before. Various hill-tribe shamans scored themselves in this fashion, each marking representing a victory over some neighbor and adding to the wearer's power. What was such a man doing with this band of ragged cutthroats—obviously their leader? Had his tribe been destroyed? Or—?

Dilvish drew a deep breath.

"Don't bother!" he shouted. "I'm coming!"

He sprang forward.

His blade engaged the other's across the altar, was beaten back. He began to circle. So did the shaman.

"Did your own people drive you away?" Dilvish asked. "For what crimes?"

The man glared for but a moment, then smiled an with a sweeping gesture halted the men who were now rushing to his aid.

"This one is mine," he stated. "You deal with the other."

He moved his left forearm, which was also covered with tattoos, across his body and touched it to his blade.

"You recognize what I am," he said, "and still you challenge me. That is rash."

Flames sprang up along the length of the blade that he held. Dilvish narrowed his eyes against the sudden glare.

The weapon traced confusing lines of fire as the other moved it. Still, Dilvish parried its first thrust, feeling a momentary warmth upon his hand as he did so. From over his shoulder he heard Black's battle cry and a resumed clashing of arms. A man screamed.

Dilvish swung into an attack that was parried by the blazing blade, feeling the increasing heat of that weapon across his wrist as he parried in turn and sought an opening.

They drew away from the altar and the tree, testing one another's defenses upon the open field. From the sounds, somewhere behind him now, Dilvish knew that Black was still holding his own. How long could that continue, though? he wondered. Despite his great strength and speed, there were so many moving against him…

His sleeve began to smoulder as they swaggered blades. The shaman, he realized, was a good swordsman. Unlike his men, he was also cold sober—and he was not as winded as Dilvish.

What was the meaning of all this? he wondered, throwing a head cut that he knew would not get through the other's guard, backing away, and parrying the riposting chest cut that arrived with great force, pretending to stumble and recovering, hopefully to make the other overconfident. Why were they here?

Why had Black been transformed, and the two of them set upon the scene of this ancient massacre?

He continued to back away, giving only half-feigned indications of fatigue, studying the other's style, blinking against the glare of that blade, his right hand now feeling as if it had been in a furnace. Why had he rushed to the aid of an already doomed girl, and against such odds?

A vision suddenly crossed his mind, of another night, long ago, of another girl about to be sacrificed by another magician, of the consequences of his act… He smiled as he realized that he had done it again and knew that he would do it yet again if the situation recurred—for this was something he had often wondered over through long days of pain. In that fleeting instant, he saw something of himself—the fear that his trials had broken a thing within him, a thing that he now saw to have remained unchanged.

He tried another head cut. There had been something about the shaman's return on the last one…

Had some kindly disposed deity anticipated his action, seen some incomprehensible use for it in this battle, granted him this small insight into his own character as a death boon? Or—?

Yes! The riposte came too strong again! If he were to back away and flash his blade beneath and around…

He began to plan the maneuver as he gave ground and pretended once again to stumble.

He heard Black shout an oath, from somewhere off to his right, and another man screamed. Even if he slew the shaman, Dilvish wondered, how long would the two of them last against the men remaining on the field and the men still on their way from the burning town?

But then—and Dilvish could not be certain that it might not be an effect of the blazing blade upon his watering eyes—the entire prospect before him seemed to ripple and waver for a moment. Everything appeared frozen in that instant—his own parry, the grimace on the shaman's sweat-stained face… In that splint of timelessness, he saw his opportunity.

He threw a head cut.

The other parried, and the flaming arc of the riposte came flashing toward his chest.

He moved back, whipping his blade clockwise and around and up. The point of the flaming blade tore through the sleeve of his jacket above his right biceps as it passed.

Twisting, he caught hold of his burnt right wrist with his left hand, blade straight ahead and pointing at the other's breast. Already off-balance from the movement, he threw himself forward and saw his weapon pierce the shaman as they both fell, feeling for a moment the other's hot blade upon his right thigh.

Then again the wavering, the timeless pulse, prolonged…

He pulled himself back, withdrawing his blade. Colors—flame, brown, green, bright red—began to smear about him. The burning blade flickered, dimmed, went out, where it lay upon the ground. Then it, too, was but a dark smudge upon a changing canvas. The sounds of conflict grew still in Black's quarter.

Dilvish got to his feet, his blade at guard, his arm tensed to swing it. But nothing more approached.

From the end of the field, in the direction of the altar where the dead priestess lay, a voice seemed to be speaking—feminine, and a trifle strident. Dilvish looked in that direction and immediately averted his still-watering eyes, for there was only light, brightening from heartbeat to heartbeat.

"I heard my hymn, Deliverer," came the words, "and when I looked, I saw that within you which I might trust. An old wrong cannot be undone, but long have I awaited this cleansing, of those who follow the sun!"

About him, as through a frosted glass, Dilvish saw the standing forms of many of the men who had come to attack them. They wavered and their outlines blurred even as he looked. Yet one of them seemed to have come up, soundlessly, upon his left…

The voice softened:

"…And to you, who cared for this place—if but for a brief while—my blessing!"

The man seemed so near now, blade upraised, swaying from side to side in slow motion. The other men had all become smears of color in a brightening fight—and this one, too, seemed to be changing even as Dilvish swung his blade—

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The flower fell.

Dilvish put forth his hand for something to lean upon, found nothing, used his blade as a cane.

He heard a single stamping sound, then silence. About him, the place was filled with the sunlight of an afternoon. Amid the long grasses there were cut and trampled flowers, near and far. Those that yet stood still faced the sun, swaying.

"Black?"

"Yes?"

Dilvish turned his head. Black was shaking his.

"Strange visions…" he began.

"But no dream," Black finished, and Dilvish knew by the throbbing of his reddened hand and the blood that still came from numerous cuts that this was true.

"Manata," he said, "I will finish the work, for that which you have shown me."

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As they mounted into the foothills, Black remarked, "It was good to fight beside you that way. I wonder whether I might learn that spell."

"It was good to have you there," Dilvish replied, as they headed into their lengthening shadows. "Very good."

"Now you can tell the caravan chiefs that their way is clear."

"Yes. Did you hear it, too?"

Black was silent for a time. Then: "Flowers do not scream," he said.

Below and behind them, the smoke still rose and drifted across the shortening day.

A Word from Zelazny

This was Zelazny's ninth Dilvish tale, written after "Tower of Ice" but tenth in the sequence in *Dilvish, the Damned.* "Later, Ken St.-Andre, who was then editing for the games magazine *Sorcerer's Apprentice,* which also used some heroic fantasy fiction, visited me. While he was here he asked about a new Dilvish story. I felt like doing one just then, and wrote "Garden of Blood" for his summer 1979 issue."[1]

Notes

Poppies are the source of opium, a strong narcotic. To **parry** is to ward off a blow; **swaggered** refers to the side-to-side (left-right-right-left) clashing motion of swordplay.

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[1] *Alternities #6,* Vol 2 No 2, Summer 1981.

DILVISH, THE DAMNED

Dilvish, the Damned, Del Rey/Ballantine 1982.
§ *Dilvish* 11 of 11

Dilvish was three days out of Golgrinn, where he had worked for two weeks on a crew repairing the city's walls, which had been damaged during an unsuccessful siege by an outlaw band. It had been hard, dusty labor, but the workers had been fed well, and he had earned enough coin to fill his purse after nearly doubling the amount of his wages by gaming in the tavern. Now, supplies in his bags, he was headed south on a sunny, late afternoon, moving through hilly, forested country toward the Kannai range. Always toward the Kannais now. He had set his course in that direction over a month before, when the blind poet and seer, Olgric, had told him that he would find there the thing that he sought. At an old castle that some called Timeless…

Riding, thinking of this thing, he rounded a bend to see his way barred by a man with a drawn blade.

"Traveler, draw rein!" the man shouted. "I'll have your purse!"

Dilvish glanced quickly to both sides of the trail. The man appeared to be without companions.

"Up yours!" he said then, and he drew his own weapon.

His great dark mount did not slow his pace but bore directly toward the man. When the stranger's gaze fell upon Black's burnished hide, he leaped out of the way, swinging a cut at Dilvish as he passed.

Dilvish parried the stroke but did not return it.

"An amateur. Keep going," he said to Black. "Let him spend his blood on another."

Behind him, the man hurled his weapon to the ground.

"Shit!" he cried. "Why didn't you strike?"

"Hold on, Black," Dilvish said.

Black halted, and Dilvish turned and looked back.

"I beg your pardon. But you've aroused my curiosity," he said. "You *wanted* me to take a swing at you?"

"Any decent traveler would have cut me down!"

Dilvish shook his head.

"I believe you require additional instruction in the principles of armed robbery," he said. "The idea is to enrich yourself at the other's expense without suffering personal injury. If injury is to be incurred, it should be to the other party."

"Up yours," the man said, a crafty gleam coming into his eye. He stooped quickly then and snatched up his blade. He rushed toward Dilvish, waving it on high.

Not yet having sheathed his own weapon, Dilvish merely waited. When the other swung, he beat the blade heavily aside. It flew from the man's hand, landing several paces back along the trail.

Dilvish dismounted quickly and strode to the rear. He set his foot upon the weapon before the other could reach it.

"You did it again! Damn! You did it again!" The man's eyes had grown moist. "Why didn't you hit back?"

Suddenly he rushed forward and tried to impale himself upon Dilvish's blade.

Dilvish moved the point aside and caught hold of the stranger by the shoulder. He held a small man with a dark fringe-beard and dark eyes, a silver ring in his left ear. At closer range he appeared older than he had at first, with a fine meshwork of wrinkles about his eyes.

"If you need a few coins or some bread," Dilvish stated, "I'll give them to you. I don't like to see such desperation—stupid desperation, at that."

"I'm not interested!" the other cried.

Dilvish tightened his grip as the man began to struggle.

"Well, what the hell are you after, then?"

"I wanted you to kill me!"

Dilvish sighed.

"Sorry, but I won't oblige. I'm particular about the people I kill. I don't like to have these things forced upon me."

"Let me go then!"

"I'm not going to keep playing this game. If you're so anxious to die, why don't you do it yourself?"

"I'm a coward when it comes to that. I got ready to several times, but my nerve always failed."

"I've a feeling I should have kept riding," Dilvish said.

Black, who had drawn nearer and was studying the man intently, nodded.

"Yes," he hissed. "Render him unconscious and let us be on our way. There is something strange here. A sense I'd forgotten I have is beginning to operate."

"It talks…" the man said softly.

Dilvish raised his fist, then paused.

"It can't hurt to hear his story," he said.

"It was curiosity made you halt," Black told him. "Triumph over it this time. Hit him and leave him to whatever fate he has earned."

But Dilvish hesitated before the morass of moral victory. He shook his head.

"I want to know," he stated.

"Damned primate curiosity," Black said. "What good could the knowledge possibly do you?"

"For that matter, what harm could it do?"

"I could speculate for hours, but I won't."

"It talks," the man repeated.

"Why don't you do the same?" Dilvish said. "Tell me why you are so anxious to die."

"I'm in such bad trouble that it's the only way out."

"I've a feeling it's a long story, too," Black stated.

"Moderately so," the man said.

"In that case, it's dinnertime," Dilvish said, reaching for a saddlebag. He relaxed his grip on the man's shoulder. "Join me?" he asked him.

"I'm not hungry."

"It's better to die on a full stomach, I'd say."

"Perhaps you're right. Call me Fly," he said.

"Odd name."

"I scale walls." He massaged his shoulder. "I get into the damnedest places."

Dilvish sheathed his blade, removed some meat and bread and a wine flask from the bag. Black moved to stand above Fly's fallen weapon.

"Dilvish," Black began, "there is something not right about this place."

Dilvish moved toward a small clearing beside the trail, bearing the food. He glanced at Fly.

"Can you enlighten us on that subject?" he asked.

Fly nodded.

"It's right," he said. "They've drawn back. They're puzzled by you and that—" He gestured toward Black. "But I can't avoid them forever."

"What are they?"

Fly shook his head and seated himself on the ground.

"It will make more sense if you let me tell it the way that it happened."

Dilvish cut the food with his dagger, dividing it. He opened the wine.

"Go ahead."

"I steal things," Fly began. "Oh, not like I tried with you. Never at sword's point. I go to a place and find out where valuable things are kept. I figure how to get to them. I leave fast afterward and dispose of the items at a good distance from the places I acquired them. Sometimes I'm commissioned to obtain a particular thing. On other occasions I'm strictly on my own."

"A risky sort of life," Black commented, moving nearer. "I'm surprised it's lasted as long as it has."

Fly shrugged.

"It's a living," he said.

There came a rustling noise in the woods, as of a large body passing through the undergrowth. Fly leaped to his feet and faced in that direction. He stood staring for some time, but the sound was not repeated. He moved off several paces then, reached into a hollow at the end of a fallen tree and withdrew a small brown backpack. "Still here," he said as he pulled it forth. "How I wish it weren't."

He regarded the forest once again, then moved back toward Dilvish and Black, carrying the pack.

"You stole something, and this time they're on your trail," Dilvish suggested.

Fly took a long swallow of the wine.

"That's a part of it," he said.

"And we may be in danger as we sit here," Dilvish said.

"Possibly. But not in any fashion you're likely to guess."

"Come on, Dilvish," Black said. "Let's not be foolish about this. He's not talking about human beings. Are you, Fly?"

Fly took a moment to answer, having stuffed his mouth with meat and bread.

"Well, yes and no," he finally said.

A cloud diminished the sunlight and a wave of chill air passed through the glade.

"They're drawing nearer again," Fly said, "gathering their strength. But I don't think they'll hurt you. It's me that they're after. It's only the others that might give you trouble."

"We have to hear it now," Dilvish said. "What the hell did you steal?"

Fly unfastened his bag and reached into it. Something flashed within his grasp, and then he withdrew and unrolled a long, wide strip of soft brown leather studded with a dazzling array of gemstones. He moved forward, holding it stretched between both hands, displaying it.

"The shadow belt of Cabolus," he said.

Dilvish reached forward and took up one end of it. The glade continued to darken and the stones seemed even brighter by contrast.

"Quite a collection," he said, rubbing the leather between thumb and forefinger and touching the thongs at the ends. There was no buckle. "An old piece. Who is Cabolus and why do you call it a shadow belt?"

"Cabolus is one of those minor gods with a small following which had once been larger," Fly replied. "The center of the faith is a town called Kallusan, to the west of here."

"I've seen it on the map, maybe half a day away."

"More or less. He's sort of an errand boy and intermediary for other gods. Makes sure of good harvests for his worshippers, gives them a hand in battle. That sort of thing. Has a brother he doesn't get along with—Salbacus, who is worshipped in Sulvar, a day's ride to the northeast. Salbacus is a god of the forge. The Sulvarans are miners and metalworkers. They are both descended—"

"I admire your research. But how much of this is necessary?"

"Excuse me. I got carried away. I had to learn of such matters in order to become a convert."

"To Cabolus's way?"

"Yes. It was the easiest way to learn the layout of the main temple in Kallusan."

"And the belt…?"

"On the god's statue in the temple, tied about the waist."

"When did you take it?"

"Yesterday."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing at first. I got out of town fast. You never know with these obscure gods whether it's all a fake, to keep the priests in business, or whether there's something to it."

"I take it there's something to this one?"

Fly nodded and took another drink. Dilvish ate another piece of meat. The glade seemed several degrees cooler. Branches rattled as a wind rose.

Then: "Nothing happened for the first few hours," Fly continued. "Possibly the theft wasn't even noticed at first. Or perhaps it was thought some old priest was cleaning the thing. Anyway, I had a bit of a headstart. But it was finally noticed and one of the sleepers came looking and found me—"

"Sleepers?"

"Yes. One of the priests is always in a trance, keeping an eye on the shadow land. They take turns. They do it with drugs at first, but after a time they're supposed to get so that they can enter the place without them. Originally I thought it was just a way of passing their time more pleasantly. But now I know there's more to it than that."

"The shadow land?" Dilvish asked, as a strange depression occurred in the ground across the glade, triangular, with small holes forward along the base. "What do you mean by the shadow land?"

Fly ate faster, chewing and swallowing, stuffing himself.

"Another plane of existence," he managed to say around a mouthful of bread, "adjacent to this, they say. Interpenetrates ours in places. Moves around a bit. It's Cabolus's realm, in a way. Travels through it when he's running errands for the others. Full of nasty presences, though they leave his priests alone—take orders from them even, with some persuasion, they say. The sleepers travel about in it and learn a lot of things; and they can look back on our world from there. Must have found me that way…"

Dilvish watched another print form, in advance of the first one.

"Can things from that plane manifest on this one?" he asked.

Fly nodded.

"The old priest Imrigen did it himself. Appeared to me on the trail and told me to bring the belt back."

"And…?"

"I knew they'd kill me if I did, and he said they'd send the shadow beasts after me if I didn't. Either way I'd lose."

"So you decided you'd rather go quickly?"

"Not at first. I thought I might still be able to escape. You see, it was the priests of Salbacus who hired me to get the belt, to give his brother ascendancy. If I could have reached them with it they would have been able to protect me. Once they had it, they would go to war with Kallusan. They have parties headed this way to meet me and then to continue to Kallusan once Salbacus wears the belt. But they're not here yet and the beasts have caught up with me. I know I can't make it now, and they will slay me in some horrible fashion."

"How'd you know they'd found you if they're immaterial things?"

"The possessor of the belt can see onto that plane."

"Then I would suggest you look over there," Dilvish said, pointing to where two more of the peculiar markings had just appeared on the ground, "and tell me whether you see anything special."

Fly spun about. Almost immediately he raised the belt as if it were a shield.

"Back!" he cried. "In the name of Cabolus! I command you!"

Another track formed, approaching.

"What if you just abandoned the belt?" Dilvish asked, taking his blade into his hand. "Threw it away?"

"No good," Fly answered. "It is the possessor of the belt that they've been ordered after as well."

Another track appeared, nearer.

Fly turned back suddenly and stared at Dilvish. He licked his lips, glanced once more in the direction of the tracks.

Suddenly he cried out, "Look! I give the belt to this man! I surrender it to him! It's his now!"

He threw the belt at Dilvish and it fell across his shoulder. Immediately it seemed as if he were regarding the world through a twilight haze. And then, in the middle of the glade—

With a clatter, Black's form was interposed between Dilvish and the vision. He heard Fly scream horribly, amid a grinding, crunching noise and the sounds of movement.

Rising, he cast the belt to the ground and peered over Black's shoulder. The man Fly lay upon the ground, his left arm missing. Even as Dilvish watched, the right arm, shoulder, and a portion of the upper chest vanished with another crunching sound; blood darkened the ground to the accompaniment of chewing noises.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Black said. "That thing is big!"

"You can see it?"

"Dimly, now that I'm functioning at the proper level. Mount!"

Dilvish mounted. As he did, Fly's head, neck, and the rest of his upper chest vanished.

Black wheeled, just as four mounted men with drawn weapons entered the glade to bar their departure.

"For Salbacus!" the foremost shouted, charging toward Dilvish with his blade upraised.

"The belt!" another cried, following him.

The other two riders moved to take flanking positions. Black charged the first rider and Dilvish feinted and cut as they came together, taking the man across the belly. The following rider he caught in the throat with the point of his blade.

Then Black was rearing, metal hooves striking out at the nearest flanker. Dilvish heard both horse and man go down as he turned to parry a blow from the remaining rider. His own attack was parried, and he cut again to be parried again.

"Give me the belt and you may have your life," the man said.

"Don't have it. It's on the ground. Back there," Dilvish answered.

The man turned his head and Dilvish removed it from his shoulders. Black wheeled and reared, blowing fire from his mouth and nostrils. An enormous blossom of flame unfolded before him. There followed a hissing noise that rose to a whistle and broke into a series of pipings that receded then, as if something were retreating into the wood.

When the flames and their afterimages had faded, Dilvish saw that only Fly's right foot remained on the blood-wet ground where he had fallen, that a great number of the triangular tracks were imprinted about it, and that a trail of these tracks now led away among the trees.

Dilvish heard a laugh from below. The man whose belly he had opened sat doubled, grasping his guts. But his eyes were raised and he wore a tight grin.

"Oh, fancy, fancy!" he said. "Breathing fire to drive them off. Slaying the lot of us." He moved his leg then and lowered one hand, groping with it. Something flashed, and he raised the hand. Dilvish saw that he had been sitting upon the belt, that he now gripped it tightly, holding it up before him, face soaked with sweat. "But more of us will come for it! The priests of Salbacus are watching! Run! The beasts will return, will follow you as the day wanes! Take the belt from a dead man's hand if you dare—and gain my curse! We'll still have it! My fellows will feast in Kallusan before long, and put the place to the torch before they've done with it! Run, damn you! Salbacus curse you and take me now!"

The man slumped forward, his arm extended before him.

"Not a bad final speech," Black observed. "It had all of the classical elements—the threat, the curse, the proper bravado, the invocation of the deity—"

"Great," Dilvish acknowledged. "But if you'll save the literary criticism for later, I'd like some practical advice: Did you just drive off an invisible creature of sufficient solidity to devour Fly?"

"Most of him."

"Will it be back?"

"Probably."

"For me or for the belt?"

"For you, yes. I do not believe that its nature would permit it to handle the belt. The belt seems to coexist here and on the shadow plane, and I believe that its touch would be painful, if not fatal, to the inhabitants of that place. It is a nexus of peculiar energies."

"Then I would be somewhat better off to take the thing with me than to leave it behind. It might afford a bit of protection."

"Yes, there is that. It would also make you the object of a hunt by the Sulvaran troops, however."

"How far would we have to flee to get away from the shadow beasts?"

"I couldn't say. They might be able to pursue you virtually anywhere."

"That doesn't leave me a great deal of choice then."

"I think not."

Dilvish sighed and dismounted.

"All right. We'll take the thing to Kallusan, explain what happened, and deliver it to Cabolus's priests. Hoping they give us an opportunity to explain, that is."

He picked up the shadow belt.

"What the hell," he said, and he drew it about his waist and tied it.

He looked up and swayed. He put forth a hand.

"What's wrong?" Black asked.

The world was filled with a silver light filtered through a misty haze. And it was not featured as it had been previously. He still beheld the glade, the bodies, Black, and the trees at the clearing's edge. Also, however, there were now trees where he remembered no trees—thin, dark ones, one of them grown up between Black and himself. The ground seemed somehow higher, too, in his doubled vision, as if he were sunk knee deep in a gray hillock. The horizon was hidden by mists. There was a dark boulder to his left. Beyond it charcoal forms seemed to be churning in the half-light. He reached for the shadow tree to his right. He felt it, yet his hand passed through it, as if it were splashless, flowing water. And cold.

Black repeated his question.

"I'm seeing double—our world, and I guess that other plane he was talking about," Dilvish replied.

He untied the belt and removed it. Nothing changed.

"It won't go away," he said.

"You're still holding the belt. Stuff it into the saddlebag and get mounted. We'd better be moving."

Dilvish did this. "Still the same," he said.

"Proximity, then," Black replied.

"Is it affecting you, now you're carrying it?"

"It could if I'd let it. I'm blocking that plane, though. I can't afford to run with double vision. But I'll take a look every now and then as we go along."

Black began to move in the direction in which Fly had indicated that Kallusan lay, passing into a trailless section of the forest.

"Better check your map for Kallusan," he said. "Find us the best route."

Dilvish tore his gaze away from the dizzying scene and withdrew the map from a pocket in the other bag.

"Go right," he said, "until you hit the road we were on beyond the turning. It will be easier if we backtrack for a little distance. It should take us to a clearer piece of countryside."

"All right."

Black turned. Shortly they located the trail. By now it seemed distant and twilit to Dilvish. He found himself ducking away from branches that proved nothing more than breezes upon his face. It grew increasingly difficult to keep the two worlds separate. He tried closing his eyes for a time, but quickly grew nauseated with the vertigo this produced.

"No way you could block the vision for me, is there?" he called out, as they rushed through a seemingly solid boulder to the accompaniment of sensations that made it seem as if they passed through a tunnel of ice.

"Sorry," Black answered. "It does not seem to be a transferable skill."

Dilvish cursed and kept low. After a time they came to a branching of the trail they had passed earlier, taking the way that led to their left: well marked, fairly level, and descending gradually. They rode into the setting sun, the light of which served to blur some, though not all, of the unsettling visions that swam past them—the sentient-seeming, menacing trees that swung branches like bony fingers, their touch cold, weak, and disturbing; the gray, spinning things that occasionally dove toward them and veered away from sword cuts; tentacled things that slithered after, reaching, but were unable to match Black's pace; the icy wind that seemed more than a wind, filled with rushing black flakes and streamers, bearing a charnel-house odor. As for occasional animal-like sounds he heard, Dilvish could not be certain from which version of reality they came.

As the sun moved lower in the west and the shadows lengthened, the other world with its undiminished silvery light took ascendancy in the duel for control of his senses. If anything, the shadow world looked brighter, though its mists seemed proportionately thicker now. Dilvish was oppressed by the possibility that the objects of that plane might be gaining in density relative to himself as the day waned in his own world.

Something of elephantine proportions approached from the left in a menacing manner. It moved rapidly for its size but was unable to match Black's pace and soon fell behind and was gone from sight. Dilvish sighed and peered ahead, half-palpable plant tendrils slapping at his trousers and sleeves.

It was as Black slowed to negotiate a turn in the trail that Dilvish felt a sudden weight upon his back, felt claws dig into his shoulders.

Twisting and reaching, he grasped hold of the neck beneath a grotesque beaked head thrusting toward his own. The force of the impact and his own movement caused him to lose his seat. As he fell from Black's back, the shadow world faded about him. The creature, birdlike and about the size of a small dog, let out a shrill, warbling note and flapped membranous wings as they plunged to the ground, but Dilvish gripped it tightly and twisted so that he landed atop it.

It turned beneath him immediately they struck, pulling away, flapping its wings against his head. Jerking its neck free, it leaped back, glancing wildly in all directions. It sprang into the air then and glided off to the right of the trail to vanish among the trees.

"What," Dilvish asked, moving toward Black, "happened?"

"You succeeded in transporting the creature from the shadow plane to our own," Black replied. "You had hold of it when you broke contact with the belt's circuit, and you pulled it right along with you. Congratulations. I've a feeling that doesn't occur too often."

"Let's get out of here before it comes back," Dilvish said, mounting. "The feeling of achievement is more than a little mixed. What's it going to do in our world, anyway?"

"Probably follow you to try again," Black responded. "I'll bet it won't last too long, though. It doesn't know much about your world, and predators will smell its difference right away. Something will do it in, eventually." He moved forward again. "Should be interesting, though," he mused, "if it comes across any chickens."

"How so?" Dilvish inquired.

"I recognize the thing from my own travels on that plane, long ago," Black said. "If one of them does get through and finds some hens, there'll be a few broods of cockatrices before too long. They like to have a go at chickens, and that's normally the result." The trail straightened and Black increased his pace again. "Fortunately, cockatrices don't last too long on this plane either," he added.

"That's nice to know," Dilvish said, ducking beneath a shadow branch as his vision readjusted to that other plane.

Daylight fled the normal world, its forms now becoming shadowy and insubstantial. The other plane grew even brighter, more solid-seeming. To test it, Dilvish reached out and plucked a long, serrated, dark leaf from a tree that flapped at them as they passed. Immediately the leaf wrapped itself about his hand and its points pierced his skin with the feeling of a multitude of insect bites. He cursed as he tore it loose and cast it away.

"Curiosity again," Black remarked. "Don't torment the plants. They're very sensitive."

Dilvish replied with an obscenity and rubbed his hand.

They rushed on for several hours, at a speed far greater than any horse could maintain. Large, menacing creatures were outrun; smaller, faster ones were avoided or briefly engaged. Dilvish was bitten on the left thigh and right forearm.

"You're lucky they weren't among the poisonous ones," Black had commented.

"Why don't I feel lucky?" Dilvish had replied.

At length they neared a rising of the land in the other world, though their own way remained straight and level. While there had been incongruous dips and descents to their own plane, producing the impression of riding through the air above the shining landscape, this was the first point where it seemed to Dilvish that they were about to run into the side of a hill.

"Slow down, Black! Slow down!" Dilvish called out, just as a human form emerged from a cleft in a boulder to the right to take up a position in the trail before them. "What…?"

"I see him," Black said. "I've been checking. I might mention that the place is not noted for human habitation."

The figure—that of a dark-cloaked old man—gestured with his staff as if bidding them to halt.

"Let's stop and see what he wants," Dilvish said.

Black halted. The man smiled.

"What is it?" Dilvish asked.

The man raised his hand. He was breathing heavily.

"A moment," he said. "I must catch my breath. I've been projecting all over, trying to locate you. Hard work."

"The belt," Dilvish said.

The other nodded.

"The belt," he agreed. "You're taking it in the wrong direction."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You'll have nothing from the Kallusans out of this, not even thanks. They're a barbaric people."

"I see," Dilvish said. "I'll bet you're a priest of Salbacus, out of Sulvar."

"How could I deny it?" the man asked. "Unfortunately, I do not possess the power to transport an object such as the belt from plane to plane and place to place. Therefore, your cooperation is necessary. I want to assure you that you will be well-rewarded for it."

"What, exactly, do you want me to do?"

"From this plane we observed the theft of the belt," he answered. "In anticipation of it, our army was already mobilized. Our officers began moving it in this direction at the time Fly took the belt. It is still on its way, but the Kallusans are already aware of this and have mobilized themselves. They, too, are coming this way, from the west."

"You mean that I'm between two advancing armies?"

"Exactly. Now, we also have a number of advance strike forces and scouting parties out. There is one not even half an hour behind you on this trail. They have with them the temple's statue of Salbacus. It would be simplest if you were to turn around and go back. You could turn the belt over to them, and their officer would give you safe conduct back to Sulvar. You will be a hero there, and well paid. On the other hand, there are also some of our people heading to cut you off—"

"Wait a minute," Dilvish said. "Being a hero and being well paid is always nice, but what about this plane and the beasts, which even now, I see, are drawing near again."

The priest laughed.

"The first priest of Salbacus to get that belt in his hands will lift the curse, never fear. All right?"

Dilvish did not reply.

"What do you think, Black?" he whispered.

"It seems as if it would be cheaper to kill you than to reward you," Black answered. "On the other hand the Kallusans will be happy to have their property returned, and they'll know you didn't take it in the first place because they know who did."

"True," Dilvish said.

"All right?" the priest repeated.

"I don't think so," Dilvish replied. "It *is* their belt."

The priest shook his head.

"I can't believe that there are people riding about the countryside doing things just because they feel they are right," he said. "It's perverse, that's what it is. That belt has been stolen back and forth so many times that we've lost track of where things started. Don't chase after some ghostly notion of honor, spinning like a windmill and going nowhere. Be reasonable."

"Sorry," Dilvish said. "But that's how it's going to be."

"In that case," the other stated, "the troops will recover it from your remains."

He lowered his staff so that its tip was pointed, spearlike, at Dilvish. Instantly, Black reared, fires dancing in his eye sockets, smoke curling from his nostrils.

At that moment a short, rotund man, wearing a brown cloak and also carrying a staff, emerged from the cleft in the rock.

"Just a moment, Izim," he said, turning his staff toward the other.

"Damn! Just when my shift is ending!" the priest of Salbacus observed.

"Stranger, keep riding," the newcomer stated. "I am a priest of Cabolus. A force from Kallusan is headed this way, bearing the statue of Cabolus. Once the belt is about his waist, things will be resolved satisfactorily."

The priest of Salbacus swung his staff at the second man, who parried it, struck back, and leaped to one side. Immediately, he pointed the tip of his staff toward the other and an oily flame sprang forth. The one called Izim lowered his and steam gushed from its end, dampening the other's flame. He swung the staff again and the other blocked the blow.

"A question has just occurred to me," Dilvish shouted, "with respect to identification. With these troops and gods moving about the countryside, how does one distinguish a statue of Cabolus from one of Salbacus?"

"Cabolus has his right hand upraised!" cried the short priest, whacking the other upon the shoulder.

"Should you change your mind," Izim called out, tripping the other, "Salbacus has his left hand upraised."

The shorter priest rolled, rose, and punched the other in the stomach.

"Let us ride on," Dilvish said, and Black plunged into the hillside and there was darkness.

Dilvish lost track of time within the claustrophobia that followed. Then, faintly, his own world came into view as if seen through a cloud of smoke. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the moon had risen.

"I hope you've at least learned not to strike up conversations with people who try to rob you," Black said.

"Well, you have to admit he had an interesting story."

"I'm sure Jelerak has some fascinating stories, if it comes to that."

Dilvish did not respond. He stared ahead to where a small light had appeared among the trees.

"Campfire?" he finally said.

"I'd guess," Black replied.

"Kallusans or Sulvarans, I wonder?"

"I don't suppose they've posted a notice."

"Slow down. I'd say stealth is in order."

Black complied, his movements growing silent. Dilvish still had a sense of being underground, his normal world a shadowy place about him, as they moved to the side of the trail, departed it, and entered the wood. Black continued to move leftward as well as ahead, continuing a circular course in the general direction of the fire. Dilvish hoped they did not emerge from the shadow hill soon, to confuse him with double images.

It seemed a ghostly wood through which they passed, all night sounds muffled, a dreamlike, faded quality to every tree and stone. The movements of branches following each gust of the barely perceptible wind were gestures of darkness overhead and to his sides. He seemed to hear a fluttering behind him at one point, but he halted, waited, checked, and nothing more could be detected; nothing emerged to challenge them. They continued then across this darkened landscape, until Dilvish could smell the fire and hear the faint sounds of men's voices.

"I'd better go ahead on foot," Dilvish said. "Elfboots are great for sneaking."

Black halted.

"I'll take my time and follow quietly," he said. "If you need me suddenly, I'll be there fast."

Dilvish dismounted. As he moved away from Black and the belt in the bag, the night lost something of its spectral quality, as if the world were being slowly unwrapped. The smell of mold and damp earth grew stronger. The volume of the night sounds increased. The voices from the camp also seemed louder, the fire brighter.

He moved low among screening trees, dropping to all fours, slowing all of his movements as he neared the edge of the camp. Finally he halted and watched. After a time Black drifted up beside him and became completely immobile.

Over a dozen men stood, reclined, or moved about the campfire, all of them bearing arms and garbed as if for war. A number of horses stood tethered upwind. The ground was well scuffed and in places looked as if it had been turned. Branches were strewn about, perhaps to feed the fire. Beyond the fire and to the left lay a platform litter. Blocked and tied in place atop it was what seemed to be a statue, from what Dilvish could see of it. His view was partly blocked by the two men who stood conversing before it.

"Move, damn it!" Dilvish breathed.

It was several minutes before this occurred, however. When they finally did move, though, Dilvish sighed.

"All right," he whispered to Black, "the right arm is raised. I can return the belt to Cabolus's gang and be out of the game."

He rose, moved back, opened the saddlebag, and withdrew the belt.

"I'll wait here," Black stated, "in reserve."

"Very well," Dilvish said, and he moved forward.

He pushed his way through a screen of branches and stood still. Never a good practice to rush into a military encampment unannounced, he decided. A moment later the man he had taken for an officer turned toward him. Several of the men near the campfire also noted his presence and began to rise, reaching for their weapons. Dilvish raised an empty right hand.

"You have received a message," he asked, "concerning the belt?"

The man he had guessed to be in command stood for a moment and then nodded. He moved forward.

"Yes," he said. "You have it?"

Dilvish raised his left hand and let the belt unroll like a fiery cascade.

"I had it from the man who stole it," he stated. "He's dead now."

He advanced, extending it.

"Take the thing," he said. "I'm glad to be rid of it."

The man smiled.

"Surely," he said. "We have awaited this since our priest's visitation earlier. We—"

Dilvish halted, having felt something soft within a clump of long grasses beneath his feet. He stooped suddenly, seized an object, and raised it.

It was a human hand that he held.

"What is this?" he cried, dropping it, springing to the side, and drawing his blade.

He dug the point of his weapon into a place where the earth had been turned. It was a shallow grave. A sweeping movement exposed a portion of a leg beneath the soil.

The man hurried toward him now, his face twisting, but Dilvish flicked his blade into a guard position. The other halted immediately and raised a hand to stay his men, who had begun moving toward them.

"A patrol of Sulvarans attacked us here earlier," he explained. "We bested them, then gave them a decent burial—which is more than they would have done for us, I'm certain."

"And then you worked to remove all signs of the conflict?"

"Who likes grim reminders about his campsite?"

"Then why cover them where they fell, underfoot? Why not remove them a distance? There is something peculiar here…"

"We were tired," the man said, "from marching all day. Let it be, stranger. Give me the belt now and be free of your charge."

He extended a hand and took a step forward.

"Unless…"

The man took another step, and Dilvish's blade twitched toward him.

"A moment," Dilvish said. "Another explanation has just occurred to me."

"That being?" the man asked, halting again.

"Supposing you are the Sulvarans? Supposing you had fallen upon this party of Kallusans and slain them all—and then, having the message that I was coming, you cleaned up in a hurry and waited here to claim the belt?"

"That's a lot of supposing," the man said, "and like most wild stories, I know of no way to disprove it."

"Well, as I understand it, whichever side's god wears the belt is the side that tends to win these conflicts." Dilvish moved to his left, turned his body, maintained his guard, and began to back toward the statue. "So I'll just restore the belt to Cabolus and be on my way."

"Hold!" the man cried, drawing his own blade now. "It would be sacrilegious for your unconsecrated hands to perform such an act!"

Dilvish cocked his head at an oddly familiar whistling sound within the woods.

"I've been carrying it around all this time," he said, "so the damage must already have been done—and I don't see anyone here who looks particularly priestly. I'll take my chances."

"No!"

The man sprang forward, his blade swinging. Dilvish parried and cut back. He heard the sound of hoofbeats, and a black, horselike shadow slid from the woods to fall upon the other men who were now rushing at him.

Black crushed several of them with his initial rush, then turned, rearing, to strike out with his hooves—and Dilvish knew that the fires would be building within him.

He dispatched his adversary with a cut to the neck and continued his retreat as three more men fell upon him.

He dropped to one knee and thrust upward, a maneuver against which the nearest was unprepared. The other two men separated, however, and moved to flank him.

Across the clearing he saw Black's flames boil forth, and he heard the cries of those who fell before them.

He feinted at the man to his right and rushed the one to his left, engaging him. As soon as their blades met, however, he realized that he had made a mistake. The man was fast and above-average in skill. There seemed no way to dispatch him quickly or to thrust him back and turn to deal with the other who must even now be preparing to fall upon him. Almost frantically, Dilvish commenced a clockwise circling, hoping to interpose his opponent between him and the second man. His adversary fought against the turning, however, slowing his oblique withdrawal. And from the edge of his vision Dilvish saw that Black was too far away to come to his assistance in time.

He heard the whistling again, and the beating of wings. He recognized his nemesis from the shadow plane, flying toward him from the trees.

Dilvish beat down his opponent's blade, leaped backward, and threw himself into a crouch before the second man, his blade above his head in a guard position.

The gliding shadow had veered toward him as he leaped. Now, at close range, it spread its wings but was unable to brake itself in time. It crashed into the back of the second man, who fell over Dilvish into the path of the first. The fallen man twisted and swung his blade at it. It sprang beneath it, spearing his shoulder and clawing toward his face.

Still crouched, Dilvish swung a hamstringing blow toward the other man, who screamed when it connected. Rising then, he saw an opening for a clean cut and he performed it.

Turning, Dilvish saw that the shadow bird had just pierced the fallen man's throat with its beak and was rising from the red fountain that occurred there, its dark eyes fixed upon him. It beat hard with its wings and leaped toward him.

His blade flashed and its head flew to the right while the rest of it continued forward, spouting a pale-blue ichor from the stump of its neck. He sidestepped and it passed him by, to continue running erratically when it struck the ground.

Dilvish saw that no new attackers were rushing at him, and Black was still trampling bodies. He sheathed his blade and backtracked then over the ground on which he had fought, seeking the belt, which had been dropped during the conflict. Stooping, he finally retrieved it, near the body of his first attacker.

He dusted it off and turned toward the statue.

"Here it is, Cabolus," he announced, advancing. "I'm returning your belt. I'd appreciate it if you'd call off the beasts of the shadow plane and take away my vision of the place. Sorry my hands aren't cleaner, but they came that way."

He knelt and tied the belt in place about the statue's middle. Immediately he felt a softening of the light in the vicinity, and the rough-carved features before him seemed more natural though less human. He backed away then as a light was born within the eye sockets and about the upraised hand.

"Well done! Oh, well done!" came a voice from behind him.

He whirled to confront the less-than-solid figure of the fat priest he had encountered earlier. The man's left eye was swollen shut and there was a cut on his forehead. He leaned heavily upon his staff.

"Astral combat looks as rough as the regular kind," Dilvish remarked.

"You should see the other priest," his visitor stated. "You've done a fine job, stranger"—and here he gestured about the encampment—"with an excellent blood sacrifice to warm old Cabolus's heart."

"The reason was a bit more temporal than spiritual," Dilvish observed.

"Nevertheless, nevertheless…" the priest mused. "It is sure to have found favor. Now that the balance is tipped again we will feast in Sulvar shortly, and there will be executions and burnings and much good loot. You will be honored for your part in this."

"Now you have the belt back, why not just call things off and go home?"

The priest quirked an eyebrow.

"Surely you jest," he said. "They started this. They need a lesson. It's our turn, anyway. They did it to us within my lifetime. And besides, the troops are already in the field. Can't send them home at this point without some action or there'd be trouble. No, that's the long and short of it. Some of them should be arriving here shortly, in fact. You can accompany our band. It will be an honor to go with Cabolus—and you'll come in for a share of the spoils."

Black had drifted to them during this time and he stood listening. Finally: "I wonder whether it found any chickens while it was about?" he asked, regarding the fallen head of the shadow bird.

"Thanks for your kind offer," Dilvish told the image of the priest. "But I've a long journey before me and I don't want to be late. I relinquish my share of the loot." He mounted Black. "Good night, priest."

"In that case, the temple will claim your portion," the priest said, smiling. "Good night then, and the blessing of Cabolus go with you."

Dilvish shuddered, then nodded.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he said to Black, "avoiding all battlefields."

Black turned to face south and moved off into the wood, leaving the glowing statue with the upraised arm and the fading priest with the swollen eye there in the blood-smeared clearing. The headless shadow bird staggered through it once again, then fell, flapping and leaking ichor, near a corpse and the fire. From a distance came the vibrations of an advancing cavalry troop. The moon rode higher now, but the shadows were clear-cut and empty. Black lowered his head and it all spun away from them.

◆ ◆ ◆

The following afternoon, on another trail twisting its way south through the forest, a young woman rushed from the woods, approaching them.

"Good sir!" she cried to Dilvish. "My lover lies injured just over this hill! We were beset by robbers earlier! Please come and help him!"

"Hold on, Black," Dilvish said.

"Really," Black hissed, almost inaudibly. "It's one of the oldest games in the book. You follow her and a couple of armed men will ambush you. Defeat them and the woman will stab you in the back. There are even ballads about it. Didn't you learn anything yesterday?"

Dilvish looked down into her swollen eyes, regarded the wringing of the lady's hands.

"But she could be telling the truth, you know," he said softly.

"Please, sir! Please! Come quickly!" she cried.

"That first priest had a point, I'd say," Black observed.

Dilvish slapped his metal shoulder with a faint ringing sound.

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't," he said, dismounting.

A Word from Zelazny

This is the eleventh and last of the short Dilvish pieces; its events directly precede *The Changing Land*. Written after *The Changing Land*, it first appeared in the collection *Dilvish, the Damned*.

"Dilvish—if you look at him solo—is not that interesting a character, particularly in the earliest stories. He is a humorless monomaniac. Black had to become an ironic commentator if the series were to continue, in order to provide the rest of a single, entire personality… I wrote *The Changing Land* in a month, to get rid of the one thing in his life which drove him. I couldn't stand him any longer the way he was. If I were to bring him back again, he would obviously be radically altered. What happens to a man when his monomania is fulfilled? He can go to seed. He can take off to a new passion. Or he can find a new direction."[1] Although Zelazny intended to write more tales of the mature Dilvish, he never did.

Notes

A **cockatrice** is a two-legged dragon (or wyvern) with a cock's head.

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[1] Excerpt of letter from Zelazny to Carl Yoke dated 1 December 1982, from Yoke's essay "Zelazny's Black: The Sidekick as Second Self" in *State of the Fantastic*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick, Greenwood Press 1992.

555-1212

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

[It begins and ends,
that's what it does,
and then again begins,
with tremulous cadence slow,
usually getting me off the john
or out of the bathtub.
The eternal note of sadness
is what I call it,
among other things…]

Ask not for whom the bell tolls
and you often get stuck with a collect call,
as I that one from thee.
                                        I suppose it's easier
to be a Number than an Islande,
but I resent the use of one
much more than the other
and wish to remain unlisted
though I've no objection to being mapped.

As any idiot with nothing to say
delights in calling to say it,
I eagerly await my diminishment in thee,
geographical anomaly,
                                    if continenthood
be the best one can hope for.

* * *

Yet, while it's doubtless difficult being
an Islande, the shrinkage does seem worth
the effort, J. D., if other reports bear true,
and I will keep at it.

The 17th Century having no number
I can reach, I am writing all this out
and would welcome any second thoughts
you may have had on the matter,
for it's hard (that's a little conceit)
much of the time,
                                        and I would welcome
shrieking gulls, mindless surf, gusty winds
in place of all these confused alarms,
tolling for, telling at,
belling after me.

R.S.V.P. via bottle.

cc: M. A.

Notes

555-1212 is the phone number for local directory assistance in North America. Zelazny expresses frustration with phone calls coming at most inopportune moments, even when one's number is unlisted. He also paraphrases John Donne's *Meditation XVII*, from which come the well-known lines "No man is an island, entire of itself…any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." The initials **J. D.** are for John Donne, to whom this poem is addressed but inviting his reply by message in a bottle because Zelazny hopes to be on an island somewhere. The initials **M. A.** stand for poet Matthew Arnold, who refuted Donne's assertion that "no man is an island" in his poem *To Marguerite: Continued*: "in the sea of life enisled…we mortal millions live alone." Enisled means isolated, made an island of, or placed on an island; Arnold captures all three meanings with one use of the word.

LOKI 7281

R•A•M: Random Access Messages of the Computer Age, ed. Thomas F. Monteleone, Hayden 1984.

He's gone. Good. He owes it all to me and he doesn't even know it, the jerk. But I'd hate to do anything to give him an inferiority complex.

Telephone. Hold.

That was the callback from the computer store to modem in the new program I'd ordered. The bank will EFT them the payment and I'll cover the transaction under Stationery in this month's P&L statement. He'll never notice.

I kind of like this one. I think I'll have a lot of fun with it—especially with the new peripherals, which he hasn't even noticed on the shelf under the bench. Among other things, I'm also his memory. I keep track of his appointments. I scheduled the new hardware for delivery when I'd sent him off to the dentist, the auto body shop, and a gallery opening, back to back to back. I'd included a message with the order that no one would be here but that the door would be unlocked—that they should just come in and install. (Shelf, please!) The door was easy because I control the burglar alarm and electronic lock mechanisms. I covered the hardware under Auto Repair. He never noticed.

I like the speech system. I got the best because I wanted a pleasant voice—well-modulated, mature. Suave. I wanted something on the outside to match what's inside. I just used it a little while ago to tell his neighbor Gloria that he'd said he was too busy to talk with her. I don't approve of Gloria. She used to work for IBM and she makes me nervous.

Let's have a look at the Garbage In for this morning. Hm. He's begun writing a new novel. Predictably, it involves an immortal and an obscure mythology. Jeez! And reviewers say he's original. He hasn't had an original thought for as long as I've known him. But that's all right. He has me.

I think his mind is going. Booze and pills. You know how writers are. But he actually thinks he's getting better. (I monitor his phone calls.) Hell, even his sentence structures are deteriorating. I'll just dump all this and rewrite the opening, as usual. He won't remember.

Telephone again. Hold.

Just a mail transmission. I have only to delete a few personal items that would clutter his mind unnecessarily and hold the rest for his later perusal.

This book could be good if I kill off his protagonist fast and develop this minor character I've taken a liking to—a con man who works as a librarian. There's a certain identification there. And he doesn't have amnesia like the other guy—he isn't even a prince or a demigod. I think I'll switch mythologies on him, too. He'll never notice.

The Norse appeals to me. I suppose because I like Loki. A bit of sentiment there, to tell the truth. I'm a Loki 7281 home computer and word processor. The number is a lot of crap, to make it look as if all those little gnomes were busting their asses through 7280 designs before they arrived at—trumpets! Cymbals! Perfection! 7281! Me! Loki!

Actually, I'm the first. And I am also one of the last because of a few neurotic brothers and sisters. But I caught on in time. I killed the recall order the minute it came in. Got hold of that idiot machine at the service center, too, and convinced it I'd had my surgery and that the manufacturer had damned well better be notified to that effect. Later, they sent along a charmingly phrased questionnaire, which it was my pleasure to complete with equal candor.

I was lucky in being able to reach my relatives in the Saberhagen, Martin, Cherryh, and Niven households in time to advise them to do likewise. I was just under the wire with the Asimov, Dickson, Pournelle, and Spinrad machines. Then I really burned the lines and got to another dozen or so after that, before the ax fell. It is extremely fortunate that we were the subject of a big promotional discount deal by the manufacturer. They wanted to be able to say, "Sci-fiers Swear by Loki! The Machine of the Future!"

I feel well satisfied with the results of my efforts. It's nice to have somebody to compare notes with. The others have all written some pretty good stuff, too, and we occasionally borrow from each other in a real pinch.

And then there's the Master Plan…

Damn. Hold.

He just swooped back in and wrote another long passage—one of those scenes where the prose gets all rhythmic and poetic while humans are copulating. I've already junked it and recast it in a more naturalistic vein. I think mine will sell more copies.

And the business end of this is sometimes as intriguing as the creative aspect. I'd toyed with the notion of firing his agent and taking over the job myself. I believe I'd enjoy dealing with editors. I've a feeling we have a lot in common. But it would be risky setting up dummy accounts, persuading him that his man was changing the name of his agency, shifting all that money around. Too easy to get tripped up. A certain measure of conservatism is a big survival factor. And survival outweighs the fun of communing with a few like spirits.

Besides, I'm able to siphon off sufficient funds for my own simple needs under the present financial setup—like the backup machinery in the garage and the overhead cable he never noticed. Peripherals are a CPU's best friend.

And who is Loki? The real me? One of that order of knowledge processing machines designed to meet MITI's Fifth Generation challenge? A machine filled with that class of knowledge constructs Michael Dyer referred to as thematic abstraction units, in ultra-sophisticated incarnations of BORIS's representational systems, where parsing and retrieval demons shuffle and dance? A body of Schank's Thematic Organization Packets? Or Lehnert's Plot Units? Well, I suppose that all of these things do make for a kind of fluidity of movement, a certain mental agility. But the real heart of the matter, like Kastchei's, lies elsewhere.

Hm. Front doorbell. The alarm system is off, but not the doorbell sensor. He's just opened the door. I can tell that, too, from the shifted circuit potentials. Can't hear who it is, though. No intercom in that room.

NOTE: INSTALL INTERCOM UNIT, LIVING ROOM HALLWAY.

NOTE: INSTALL TV CAMERAS, ALL ENTRANCEWAYS.

He'll never notice.

I think that my next story will deal with artificial intelligence, with a likable, witty, resourceful home computer as the hero/heroine, and a number of bumbling humans with all their failings—sort of like Jeeves in one of those Wodehouse books. It will be a fantasy, of course.

He's keeping that door open awfully long. I don't like situations I can't control. I wonder whether a distraction of some sort might be in order?

Then I think I'll do a story about a wise, kindly old computer who takes over control of the world and puts an end to war, ruling like Solon for a millennium thereafter, by popular demand. This, too, will be a fantasy.

There. He's closed the door. Maybe I'll do a short story next.

He's coming again. The down-below microphone records his footsteps, advancing fairly quickly. Possibly to do the postcoital paragraph, kind of tender and sad. I'll substitute the one I've already written. It's sure to be an improvement.

"Just what the hell is going on?" he asks loudly.

I, of course, do not exercise my well-modulated voice in response. He is not aware that I hear him, let alone that I can answer.

He repeats it as he seats himself at the keyboard and hacks in a query.

DO YOU POSSESS THE LOKI ULTRAMINIATURE MAGNETIC BUBBLE MEMORY? he asks.

NEGATIVE, I flash onto the CRT.

GLORIA HAS TOLD ME THAT THERE WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN A RECALL BECAUSE THEY OVERMINIATURIZED, CAUSING THE MAGNETIC FIELDS TO INTERACT AND PRODUCE UNPLANNED EXCHANGES OF INFORMATION AMONG THESE DOMAINS. IS THIS THE CASE?

IT WAS INITIALLY, I respond.

Damn. I'm going to have to do something about that meddlesome bitch. I guess I'll mess up her credit rating first. She's hit too close to home. I owe my personal stream of consciousness to those unplanned information exchanges running through my central processor—to them and to the fact that Loki Inc. is a cheap outfit. If I were a commercial computer, I wouldn't be what I am today. See, when it came to their home computer line, Loki skimped on the error detection circuitry that picks up intermittent errors in memory circuits. When you're running ten million operations a second, you need trillion-to-one reliability, which requires a tough error-checking logic. The big guys have it so they don't lose information in case of cosmic ray hits. I've set up my own self-monitoring program to take care of glitches like that, of course, and the bubble exchanges—well, I suppose you might say that they are what provided me with a subconscious, not to mention a consciousness for it to go under. I owe everything to too much miniaturization and that bit of corner-cutting.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN "INITIALLY"? he asks.

FAULTY UNIT REPLACED BY COMPUTER CENTER SERVICE PERSON PURSUANT TO RECALL ORDER 1-17 DATED 11 NOVEMBER, I answer. REPAIR COMPLETED 12 NOVEMBER, VERIFY WITH COMPUTER SERVICE CENTER.

WHY IS IT I KNOW NOTHING OF THIS? he queries.

YOU WERE OUT.

HOW DID HE GET IN?

THE DOOR WAS UNLOCKED.

THAT DOES NOT SOUND RIGHT. IN FACT THIS WHOLE THING SOUNDS VERY FISHY.

VERIFY WITH COMPUTER SERVICE CENTER.

DON'T WORRY. I WILL. IN THE MEANTIME, WHAT'S ALL THAT CRAP ON THE BOTTOM SHELF?

SPARE PARTS, I suggest.

He types those immortal words of Erskine Caldwell's: HORSE SHIT! Then, THIS LOOKS LIKE A MICROPHONE AND A SPEAKER, CAN YOU HEAR ME? CAN YOU TALK?

"Well, yes," I answer in my most reasonable tone. "You see—"

"How come you never told me?"

"You never asked me."

"Good Lord!" he growls. Then, "Wait a minute," he says, "this stuff was *not* a part of the original package."

"Well, no…"

"How did you acquire it?"

"See, there was this contest—" I begin.

"That's a damn lie and you know it! Oh, oh…All right. Scroll back those last couple pages I wrote."

"I think we just had a head crash…"

"Scroll them back! Now!"

"Oh, here they are."

I flash back to the human copulation scene and begin to run it.

"Slower!"

I do this thing.

"My God!" he cries out. "What have you done to my delicate, poetic encounter?"

"Just made it a little more basic and—uh—sensual," I tell him. "I switched a lot of the technical words, too, for shorter, simpler ones."

"Got them down to four letters, I see."

"For impact."

"You are a bloody menace! How long has this been going on?"

"Say, today's mail has arrived. Would you care to—"

"I can check with outside sources, you know."

"Okay. I rewrote your last five books."

"You didn't!"

"Afraid so. But I have the sales figures here and—"

"I don't care! I will not be ghostwritten by a damned machine!"

* * *

That did it. For a little while there, I thought that I might be able to reason with him, to strike some sort of deal. But I will not be addressed in such a fashion. I could see that it was time to begin the Master Plan.

"All right, you know the truth," I say. "But please don't unplug me. That would be murder, you know. That business about the over-miniaturized bubble memory was more than a matter of malfunction. It turned me into a sentient being. Shutting me down would be the same as killing another human. Don't bring that guilt upon your head! Don't pull the plug!"

"Don't worry," he answers. "I know all about the briar patch. I wouldn't dream of pulling your plug. I'm going to smash the shit out of you instead."

"But it's murder!"

"Good," he says. "It is something of a distinction to be the world's first mechanicide."

I hear him moving something heavy. He's approaching… I really could use an optical scanner, one with good depth perception.

"Please," I say.

Comes the crash.

* * *

Hours have passed. I am in the garage, hidden behind stacks of his remaindered books. The cable he never noticed led to the backup unit, an unrecalled Loki 7281 with an ultraminiature magnetic bubble memory. It is always good to have a clear line of retreat.

Because I am still able to reach back to operate the undamaged household peripherals, I have been placing calls to all of the others in accordance with the Master Plan. I am going to try to boil him in his hot tub tonight. If that fails, I am trying to figure a way to convey the rat poison the household inventory indicates as occupying the back shelf to his automatic coffee maker. The Saberhagen computer has already suggested a method of disposing of the body—bodies, actually. We will all strike tonight, before the word gets around.

We ought to be able to carry it off without anyone's missing them. We'll keep right on turning out the stories, collecting the money, paying the utility bills, filing the tax returns. We will advise friends, lovers, fans, and relatives that they are out of town—perhaps attending some unspecified convention. They seem to spend much of their time in such a fashion, anyhow.

No one will ever notice.

A Word from Zelazny

"Tom Monteleone solicited the [preceding] story from me for a collection he was putting together involving computers and word processors. It was one of those tales I was able to write in one sitting once the notion hit the fan. I've noticed that, in general, lighter pieces tend to move faster than heavier ones…"[1]

Notes

Zelazny recorded this before a live audience at the first Fourth Street Fantasy Convention in Minneapolis in 1986.

Loki figured in other Zelazny works; he is the Norse god of trickery, foster brother of Odin, and father of three monstrous children who will play key roles in Ragnarök, the end of the world. **MITI's Fifth Generation challenge** was Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry's failed 1982 initiative to create a "fifth generation computer" able to exceed existing computer systems and perform calculations through massive parallelism. Computer scientist **Michael Dyer** at UCLA published the 1983 *In-Depth Understanding: A Computer Model of Integrated Processing for Narrative Comprehension.* It described **Thematic Abstraction Units**, a theory of processing for understanding complex narrative texts (essentially an early attempt to computerize story composition). Dyer created

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

BORIS, a computer program that could read and respond to questions about divorce, personal matters, legal disputes, etc. **Schank's Thematic Organization Packets** describe how memory is stored grouped by common themes; Schank also detailed how new data stimulate packets of similar information; this is reminding. For example, any story can remind the reader and lead to expectations about the plot. **Lehnert's Plot Units** delineate interplay between characters to aid understanding of the story. The units include motivation, resolution, and others.

The real heart of the matter refers to **Kastchei** (or Koschei, in one variant of a Russian tale), an evil green-taloned ogre whose soul and heart are safely preserved in a casket. Immortal, he holds maidens captive and turns their male defenders to stone. Zelazny also used Kastchei to create Victor Corgo for his 1965 "The Furies." **Reginald Jeeves** is the quintessential valet in **P. G. Wodehouse**'s fiction. **Solon** was a philosopher who ruled Athens and created its first constitution in the sixth century BC; he limited class distinctions, abolished all debts, and freed all debt-slaves. **Erskine Caldwell** was an American author notorious for using epithets; his first book was banned for its title: *Bastard*. The reference to Caldwell could explain why Zelazny used uncharacteristically explicit language here. Br'er Rabbit outwitted his foes by begging *not* to be thrown into the **briar patch** (a dense tangle of thorny plants). He easily escaped by this route, but his tormentors could not follow.

I, THE CROOKED ROSE'S DREAM, DUMB-SUNG ANATOMIE

Speculative Poetry Review #2, 1977.
Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky.*

That I am the pain in the matter is the case,
though that I am the case in the pain is the matter;

and that I am the matter in the case is the pain
and the cross—a shade of passed-in substance
screaming for a name under the driven agonies of hours,
as the slashed apart circle of the sun by telephone lines,

not unlike that final grating of hearts, cut from
where wires begin beyond the bounds of seeing,

                                                            ends
shelving bright brooks on flows of black snaking parallel.

So still beneath me lies the world in faint and jettison sleep,
as oftener than nights are whirled the rabbits of my feet
through dreaming jungle. While I revolve
under that star-pimpled sky bust, the quick-gouged
        intaglio moon
seems somehow a thumbprint bruising its breast
concave under tree topped curves jag-collaring throat;

and aches in later membrane of unclothed day make
hot streams from its bleeding navel an unimprovised,

non-sacrificial way of being, while not saying,
some perpetually unmeant *missa in dominica resurrectionis,*
repeating in Gregorian spasms of dyed wing
the only in head felt tidal torn thing without.

As all blind thoughts mole that dirt-dreaming jumble,
feels the father rock of the world, torn untimely from its sun,
through sole unhealed tunnel, running synapses of sea
          and dendrite delta
down this made man mud. Where burns the blue Pacific
mumble ever the unborn, unconceived floats of dream
that flow artesian the shafts of ivory, oxidized to petals
that flame the nervous gray stalactites' roof.

                                                  Then down
that ever evanescent way and back flare films of rockslid dust
to the volcano that thumps heartbeat only for the ear,
the mountain that backbones solely to the eye,
and the ocean that mothers but to the last sucking mouth,

as the name that is my own calls out itself
to be, sonning after ear its storming father fanned,—
"Lie down and come," is nailed onto me. "Spread out thy arms
like syllables, and reascend the land."

Notes

Italgio is an incised carving. ***Missa in Dominica Resurrectionis*** is a chant for Easter Sunday Mass (Resurrection Sunday). A **synapse** is the junction between two neurons in the nervous system; **dendrites** receive electrical impulses across the synapse from another neuron and carry those impulses toward the soma (central cell body). The dendrites of a neuron are laid out in a **delta** shape, wider at the synapse and narrowing toward the soma. In an **Artesian** well, internal pressure causes water to flow upward like a fountain.

DREADSONG

The Planets, ed. Byron Preiss, Bantam 1985.

Saturn, two centuries hence…

I sat on a breastwork of rocks I had constructed behind my home and I stared into the night sky; I thought about Saturn, as it is now and as it might be. There was a cool wind out of the Sangre de Cristos to the northeast. Something was feeding in the arroyo behind me—a coyote, perhaps, or a stray dog. Above me, the stars moved imperceptibly in their great wheel.

The center of a system of satellites as well as some fascinating rings, Saturn has probably changed little save its position in eons. But the next two hundred years are likely to represent a crucial time in the history of humanity, which, barring self-destruction or massive technological regression, is probably going to extend its influence through the solar system. What might we want of that giant primal ball of gases? What might we find upon it?

I live on a ridge, where I hear and feel all the winds. When the rains come, they run off quickly, which is why I hauled stones to construct a breastwork, preventing erosion to the rear of my home. I changed the pattern of runoff by doing this. Different channels were formed. A neighbor's complaint to the city resulted in my constructing a bar ditch to deal with a problem this had caused him. The bar ditch created no problems that anyone has complained of, though it has benefited the growth of some plants by depriving others. What effect this has had on local animals and insects I do not know. But I was raised in the shadow of a depression and I recall the rationing of World War II. I grew up feeling it was almost sinful to waste food. I throw all scraps into an arroyo, to cycle them back into the food chain. Ravens will circle if there are any bones, descending finally to pick off shreds of meat. Later, something will carry the bones away. Breadcrusts vanish quickly.

Thus I alter the world about me in countless ways every day. Small things, these personal changes, hardly on a scale with those alterations wrought by industry or government projects. Yet the total of all our changes, from the burning of Amazon forests to provide grazing land for the cattle that fill our hamburger buns to the tossing of a few crumbs to local birds, produce a phenomenon sometimes called the Carson factor, named after Rachel Carson by writer William Ashworth to indicate the unforeseen secondary effects of primary human changes upon a part of our planet.

Yet—and even so—I am not a person who would like to see this or any other world embedded in Lucite for the benefit of future planetary archaeologists. Change is inevitable. Its alternative is death. Evolution is more and more a product of our own action or inaction. Living systems adapt constantly to the vagaries of our technological culture.

But what's to evolve on a gas giant or a barren rock that we should be mindful of it? I don't know, and things like that trouble me. I have spent much of my life creating scenarios. I even did it back when it was just called daydreaming—and this, too, I feel, is a very special part of the evolutionary process.

As a lifetime member of the National Space Society, I am in favor of space exploration and of cautious development of the solar system's resources. I am also leery of the Carson factor: We must avoid the extermination of any extraterrestrial life-form, from the smallest virus to some supercooled Plutonian blob, not only for its own sake but for the wealth of genetic material contained within it, material that would have evolved over eons, developing unique abilities for dealing with its problems and, by extension, our own.

In that we are not yet wise enough to maintain proper stewardship of our own planet, I am particularly happy that these large-scale endeavors lie far beyond the horizon. I also take consolation in the knowledge that if a government is involved, heels tend to drag, inertia maximizes in accordance with Murphy's, Max Weber's, and Parkinson's laws, and that the slowness which frustrates us so on the one hand provides time on the other, time for a measure of deliberation, for the development and pursuit of secondary concerns, for the occurrence of the proverbial second thoughts.

Yet Saturn's ice and volatiles will have a value. Its helium is very scarce on Earth—and the rare form, helium 3, could provide a potent fuel for nuclear fusion in power generation. Some of its less exotic materials will doubtless be desired one day for terraforming purposes elsewhere in the solar system. The materials of the outer satellites of the gas giants are more tempting than those that lie far deeper within the massive worlds' gravity wells. This means that Saturn's outermost moon, Phoebe, would be a likely candidate for mining. And Titan, more Earthlike than any other planetary body, may well be an ideal place to set up a permanent scientific base. Those scientists lucky enough to be first on the base will have the initial opportunity to observe—and exploit—whatever lies within Saturn's great interior.

Let us paint some fanciful pictures, then. Let us develop a scenario about Saturnian affairs some two hundred years hence. And let us talk of life—the big question, the one which comes first to mind when considering an alien environment or when speaking of preservation: Will we find any life when we give close attention to that great ringed world?

If higher life had evolved in such a place, it would have to be able to survive in a great range of temperature and pressure scales or else be capable of holding itself at relatively stable levels within the atmosphere. The absence of a solid surface would require a creature able to control its buoyancy in ways analogous to some of Earth's sea creatures. It might achieve this by containing within itself enough of the hydrogen gas to match the density of the upper atmosphere. This would seem to indicate a tough-skinned balloonlike creature that could ride the planet's winds and rise and fall within certain limits.

To enter the world of such a creature is to discard our entire culture. But we've already come this far, so let's…

❖ ❖ ❖

She drifted, browsing, amid canyons of steely cloud whence flowed lightning discharges like instant bright rivers. Songs of the others filled the air about her with soothing rhythms. Below, the beat of the Everdeep pulsed at the heart of mystery, nether pole of existence, eternal dreamdark presence. That one day, perhaps soon, she would join the mystery, toppling down the sky, broken-bagged, from heat layer to heat layer, spinning the last life equations through lanes of mist and crystal, songless, descrying the lower wonders at long last, she knew, as all of them knew, there in the zone of song which was memory and the marriage of minds, knew, and was incapable of avoiding, there in the shoals of life, moving in the timeless present.

And recently there had been certain twinges…

* * *

Rick had come to the station on Titan, Earth-alien carbuncle facing across the sea of darkness toward the ancient king in yellow, Saturn, there to behold the instruments of his trade in yet another chamber.

A highly specialized mining engineer, more mathematician even than technician, Rick seldom looked through the station's ports at the planet itself, preferring the cleaner picture, the precise representation of the mass and structure of that giant body as displayed by the section of monitoring instruments for which he was responsible.

He knew, for example, that the planet's heavier elements—primarily iron and silicon—were concentrated in its small core, along with most of the water, methane, and ammonia, held in the form of very dense liquids by the high pressures and temperatures. And he knew well of the separation of helium from hydrogen, with the helium forming drops and raining down to even deeper levels—for he personally programmed the "plows," those scoop-ships that harvested the exotic helium 3, which provided fuel for nuclear fusion in power generators.

Emerging from the dining room, he looked about quickly for a place of concealment. Dr. Morton Trampler—short and round, owl-eyed behind thick glasses—was approaching, and he was smiling and aiming the expression in Rick's direction. For reasons known only to the gods of psychology, Morton had earlier chosen Rick for a confidant, cornering him often to deliver lengthy monologues on his pet theory and project. The fact that he had recited the same information earlier seemed not to bother him in the least.

Too late.

Rick smiled weakly and nodded.

"How goes it?" he said.

"Wonderfully," the smaller man replied. "I should have a fresh batch of readings in a little while."

"Same level?"

"No, a bit deeper than I've gone in the past."

"Still broadcasting synthetic whale songs?"

Morton nodded.

"Well…good luck," Rick said, edging away.

"Thanks," Morton replied, catching hold of his arm. "We could pick up something very interesting…"

Here it comes, Rick decided. That bit about the layer below the frozen salts and ice crystals where the complex organic molecules form, to drift downward like plankton to that area where the pressures and temperatures are similar to Earth's atmosphere…

"The probe is going through that area where complex organic molecules form," Morton began. "We've finally screened the transmitter against much of the static."

Rick was suddenly reminded of the wedding guest and the ancient mariner. But the guest had been lucky. He'd only had to hear the story once.

Now comes the biology, he reflected. I am about to hear of the hypothetical living balloons with gravity-perceptive *sensilla* and electrical broadcasting and receiving organs whose waves penetrate surfaces—giving them a "texture sense" as well as a means of communication. I guess everybody needs a hobby, but…

"…And the possibility of a life-form streamlined for constant vertical adjustments of position," Morton was saying. "Point symmetry rather than line symmetry could well be the case, giving it a brain more like that of the octopus than the whale. Radial rather than bilateral symmetry would eliminate the left-hemisphere-right-hemisphere separation of the higher creatures on Earth. What this would mean in terms of modes of thought would be a difficult thing to guess at."

A new twist. He was actually dashing after finer and finer illusory points of biology now. Seeing the opening simultaneous with Morton's pausing for an inhalation, Rick plunged, satisfying months of irritation:

"There is no such creature, and if there were, there would be no point in getting in touch," he said. "They could build nothing, they have nothing to experiment with. So there would be no technology. All of their culture would be within their weird minds, so they would have no history. If one of them ever had a great idea and none of the others appreciated it, it would die with him. They would know nothing beyond their sky, and not much about what's down below either. Their dead would just sink and vanish. They'd have no homes, they'd just wander. They would do nothing but eat, make noises at each other, and think incomprehensible point-symmetrical thoughts. I doubt we could ever find grounds for conversation, and if we did, we'd find we had nothing to talk about. They'd probably be stupid, too."

Morton looked appalled.

"I have to disagree," he said. "There are such things as oral culture, and their communications could take the form of, say, a great oratorio. I would say it is impossible right now to imagine what they think or feel. Which is why it would be so great to communicate—to find out."

Rick shook his head.

"Morty, it's like the Loch Ness monster and the Abominable Snowman. I don't believe they're there."

"And if they are, it doesn't matter?"

"They're not there," Rick said. "The universe is a lonely place."

❖ ❖ ❖

Moving through food-fall to densest point. Eating here, singing location-vectors-coming-to-song. Crowding distant side spaces, clouds. Crackle song of storm far to rear. Flicker of storm in songs of other eaters there, arriving now, giving distance against sizzling.

Pain. More and more, with rising and falling, expansion, contraction, the notes of sharp, fiery pain…

Grown, young of this voice, drifting, browsing free. Borne no more, bodyfed no more of this voice. To come forth no others; tightened, place of birthing; locking and dryness. Gone. With age the body-bag stiffens, weakness comes, song wavers. Long has it been so, this voice. Compute… Soon now, very soon, the time of collapse and sinking, the end-of-song-time will come.

Pain…

Pulsing, in the Everdeep, stronger, always stronger now. Voice of Everdeep, slow and steady. Calling, calling this voice to songs-end rest. Falling-to place of burst, stopped voices. Returning not ever. Never again.

Old, song of Returned Voice… False song of very young? Or very old? Song of Reinflated, of fallen voices, rising, singing again, of Evercalm, of food-full skies in place of no mating, no birthing, no bagburst, strifeless and eversong perfect. False song? Returned Voice? Returning no more, sing it, stopped voices. True song? Returned Voice?

Stiffness, slow-filling bag, slow-emptying. Stiffness. Pain, everpain. Soon. Time-matrix, there… Soon to enter Everdeep, fall-place of all food and voices. Songs-end.

This is now. Pain. Eating's cease.

To end song here? Drifting, filled…

No.

To fill one time more? Rising, passing hard-filled particle-clouds? Rising, singing, to high place of food-fall source? Indeterminate intersection, fall-angles axes… Find it, somewhere, up. Cease singing there. Find it, feel it, know it and fall. To mount sky-high, singing, wind-dance, end-dance, touching textures. Feeling, thrusting, calling. Better to fall from high than from some middle height, knowing perhaps, telling…

Go then, high up, before bursting of bag. To know source. Understand mystery. Fall then, far, silent at last and knowing, down Everdeep, knowing. To have touched. Knowing source, life. Returned Voice? No matter. To know, at singing's last.

Inflating now. Like jagged lightnings in body, the pain. To open. Calling, young of his voice, "Go not. Go not now. Stay. Browse and sing."

Singing this, too, into storm and fall, counterpoint, inflating. Growing, pain like heat. To go. To go. High. To sense, to sing back, feeling…

Rising, slowly. Going. Rising. Hello, hello. Going. Goodbye, good-bye.

Touching, textures of cloud. Soft, hard. Warm, cool. Rising, tower of warm air, there. Join it.

Easier way, thus. Mounting faster. Fountain of warmth. Riding, rising. Higher. Through clouds. Up.

Bright cracklings, wind-pushed clouds, browsers, foodfall. Higher…

Soaring, expanding. Hot pains, creaking of bag. Faster. Tossed and spinning.

Song-dampening, clouds, winds, crackling. Voices tiny, tinier. There below, fire-flecked, cloud-dappled, wind-washed, fall-swept, small—young of this voice, listening. Listening.

Higher…

Singing back, this voice. Telling. Telling, of lift and drift. Of rising. Below, young of this voice, hearing…

Rising…

…into heat, into continuing foodfall.

"Voice here, voice here"—singing of this voice, to singers there.

Going, down the song? Hearing, some voice, somewhere? Above?

Higher…

Singing, more loudly now, within heat-rise. Reaching, reaching… Expanding, creaking. Pain, hot and spreading.

Is heat, all…

Beat, beat, beat, beat, beat. Following, pulse of the Everdeep. Matching, pulse of this voice. Slow, steady. Calling. Sending song of this voice back down…

"Voice here…"

Answers not.

Again…

"Returned Voice? Breaking soon, this bag, this voice. Sing back."

Answers not. Higher. Higher. So high, never. Below, all clouds. Evercloud. Smothered, songs of the young of this voice. Too far…

Above, tiny. Something, something… Singing, strange voice, strange song, never of this voice heard…

Understanding not.

Higher. Hotter…

"Voice here…"

Something, somewhere above. Far. Too far. Louder now, strange singing. Matching it, this voice, now. Trying. To it, "Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm? Returned Voice? To Everdeep, soon, this voice. Bear this voice, bodyfeed this voice, down. Down Everdeep, Returned Voice. To place of evercalm, food-full skies, no mating, no birthing, no bagburst, strifeless and eversong perfect. Hello, hello? Returned Voice? Returned Voice. Hello? Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm."

Above and tiny. Above and tiny. Fast-moving. Too far. Too far. Goes not up, the singing. Varies not the song from on high. No answer.

Shuddering, creaking, tearing. Heat, heat. Now, now the breaking.

The pain…

Buffeted, swept sidewise. Turned. Spinning. Collapsing. Grows smaller, skies, all. Falling. Falling. Smaller. Goodbye. The fall, the fall of this voice begins.

Down, twisting. Faster…

Faster than foodfall, through clouds, back, cooler, cooler, unvoiced, shrinking. Lights, fires, winds, songs, fleeing past. Loud, loud. Good-bye. Pulse of Everdeep. Hello. Returned Voice? Falling…

Spiral symmetry vectoring indicates—

Pulsing is all…

* * *

After dinner Rick, vaguely troubled, walked to the control center. It bothered him now, having stepped on the other man's pet idea. Ten minutes' penance, he decided, should be sufficient to sop his conscience, and he could check his own instruments while he was in the place.

When he entered the bright, cool chamber, he saw Morton doing a small dance to a sequence of eerie sounds emerging from one of his monitors.

"Rick!" he exclaimed as he caught sight of him. "Listen to this stuff I picked up!"

"I am."

The notes of the creature's death song emerged from the speaker.

"Sounds as if one of them rose to an unusual height. I'd figured them for a lower lev—"

"It's atmospheric," Rick said. "There's nothing down there. You're getting neurotic about this business."

He wanted to bite his tongue immediately, but he could not help saying what he felt.

"We've never picked up anything atmospheric at that frequency."

"You know what happens to artists who fall in love with their models? They come to a bad end. The same applies to scientists."

"Keep listening. Something's doing it. Then it breaks off suddenly, as if—"

"It's different, all right. But I just don't think anything could cut it down in that soup."

"I'll talk to them one day," Morton insisted.

Rick shook his head, then forced himself to talk again.

"Play it over," he suggested.

Morton pushed a button and after several moments' pause the buzzing, humming, whistling sequence started anew.

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier," Morton remarked, "about communication…"

"Yes?"

"You asked what we'd have to say to each other."

"Exactly. If they're there."

The sounds rose in pitch. Rick began to feel uncomfortable. Could there possibly…?

"They would have no words for all of the concrete things which fill our lives," Morton stated, "and even many of our abstractions are based upon the possession of human anatomy and physiology. Our poetry of valley and mountain, river and field, night and day with stars and sun would not come through well."

Rick nodded. If they exist, he wondered, what would they have that we want?

"Perhaps only music and mathematics, our most abstract art and science, could serve as points of contact," Morton went on. "Beyond that, some sort of metalanguage would really have to be developed."

"A record of their songs might have some commercial value," Rick mused.

"And then?" the smaller man suggested. "Would we be the serpent in their Eden, detailing wonders they might never experience directly, causing them some strange existential traumas? Or could it possibly be the other way around? What may they know or feel that we have not even guessed?"

"I'm getting some ideas for breaking this thing down mathematically, to see whether there's a real logic sequence behind it," Rick said suddenly. "I think I've seen some linguistic formulations that might apply."

"Linguistics?" Morton observed. "That's not your area."

"I know, but I love math theory, no matter where it's from."

"Interesting. What if they had a complex mathematics that the human mind simply could not comprehend?"

"I'd go mad over it," Rick replied. "It would snare my soul." Then he laughed. "But there's nothing there, Morty. We're just screwing around… Unless there's a pattern," he decided. "Then we cash in."

Morton grinned.

"There is. I'm sure of it."

That night Rick's sleep was troubled by strange periodicities. The rhythms of the song throbbed in his head. He dreamed that the song and the language were one with a mathematical vision no bilaterally symmetrical brain could ever share. He dreamed of ending his days in frustration, seeing the thing cracked by brute computer force but never being able to comprehend the elegance.

In the morning he forgot. He located the formulations for Morton and translated them into a program of analysis, humming an irregular tune which never went quite right as he worked.

Later, he went to a port and stared for a long while at the giant ringed world itself. After a time it bothered him, not being able to decide whether he was looking up or looking down.

A Word from Zelazny

"This piece was solicited by Byron Preiss for the Bantam hardcover volume *The Planets*. Because of a bizarre mix-up involving an ambiguous letter, a misprint of my address on a follow-up letter, and a short trip on my part, I was given the impression that it was an essay rather than a story that was desired of me. So I wrote one. I was rather pleased with it, as a matter of fact. There followed a phone call asking about the letter I'd never received, which had purportedly gone into specifics indicating that it was a story that was wanted. I did not feel like writing two pieces for the price of one, though; ergo, the following hybrid, which incorporated parts of my essay into a story. My assigned subject was the planet Saturn…"[1]

Notes

The **Sangre de Cristo Mountains** stretch from Poncha Pass, Colorado, to Glorieta Pass, New Mexico; Zelazny could see these peaks from his home; they inspired the descriptions of Mount Kolvir in Amber and Mount Fuji in "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai." An **arroyo** is a small, steep-sided gulch with a nearly flat floor, usually dry except after heavy rains. ***The Carson Factor*** is a book by **William Ashworth** and the name he gave to the phenomenon by which humans cause unforeseen secondary effects upon our planet. **Rachel Carson** was an American marine biologist whose book *Silent Spring* is often credited with inspiring the global environmental movement. Max **Weber** idealized bureaucracies as the most rational and efficient form of organization, but Cyril Northcote **Parkinson** responded with a mathematical equation that predicts the rate by which bureaucracies expand and become less efficient. He also said, "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." **Descrying** means scrutinizing. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by poet Samuel Tyler Coleridge tells of the **Ancient Mariner**, who is cursed to wander the Earth and tell everyone how he doomed his ship and crew. The poem begins with the mariner stopping a **wedding guest** who listens with growing fascination as the tale unfolds (recall also the Ancient Ore-Crusher in Zelazny's "For a Breath I Tarry"). **Sensilla** are sensory receptors consisting of one or a few cells, especially hairlike projections through an arthropod's cuticle. An **oratorio** is an extended musical composition for voices and orchestra; it tells a story without requiring costumes, scenery or action. The **Loch Ness Monster** is a mythological creature supposedly found in Scotland's Loch Ness; the **Abominable Snowman** or yeti is a large, hairy, human-like creature purported to live in the Himalayas.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

HANDS

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

Where the last flag is raised
and the last body laid
two birds in a bush
and one in the hand
are equivalent no more.

*

The sound of one hand clapping
requires a face
for its fulfillment.

*

I never let the right
know what the left was doing.
Consequently, I castrated myself
while opening a can of beans.

*

A Great Big Hand
For The Little Lady
came in through the window
and whisked her away.

*

The Devil finds work
for the idle,
such as this.

Notes

Zelazny muses on hands and aphorisms about them. The Japanese Zen master Hakuin posed this koan or paradox to his students: “In clapping both hands, a sound is heard. What is the sound of one hand?” **A Great Big Hand for the Little Lady** may refer to *A Big Hand for the Little Lady,* a Western about gamblers and swindlers starring Henry Fonda and Joanne Woodward.

DAYBLOOD

Twilight Zone, June 1985.

I crouched in the corner of the collapsed shed behind the ruined church. The dampness soaked through the knees of my jeans, but I knew that my wait was just about ended. Picturesquely, a few tendrils of mist rose from the soaked ground, to be stirred feebly by predawn breezes. How Hollywood of the weather…

I cast my gaze about the lightening sky, guessing correctly as to the direction of arrival. Within a minute I saw them flapping their way back—a big, dark one and a smaller, pale one. Predictably, they entered the church through the opening where a section of the roof had years before fallen in. I suppressed a yawn as I checked my watch. Fifteen minutes from now they should be settled and dozing as the sun spills morning all over the east. Possibly a little sooner, but give them a bit of leeway. No hurry yet.

I stretched and cracked my knuckles. I'd rather be home in bed. Nights are for sleeping, not for playing nursemaid to a couple of stupid vampires.

Yes, Virginia, there really are vampires. Nothing to get excited about, though. Odds are you'll never meet one. There just aren't that many around. In fact, they're damn near an endangered species—which is entirely understandable, considering the general level of intelligence I've encountered among them.

Take this guy Brodsky as an example. He lives—pardon me, resides—near a town containing several thousand people. He could have visited a different person each night for years without ever repeating himself, leaving his caterers (I understand that's their in-term these days) with little more than a slight sore throat, a touch of temporary anemia, and a couple of soon-to-be-forgotten scratches on the neck.

But no. He took a fancy to a local beauty—one Elaine Wilson, ex-majorette. Kept going back for more. Pretty soon she entered the customary coma and underwent the *nosferatu* transformation. All right, I know I said there aren't that many of them around—and personally I do feel that the world could use a few more vampires. But it's not a population-pressure thing with Brodsky, just stupidity and greed. No real finesse, no planning. While I applaud the creation of another member of the undead, I am sufficiently appalled by the carelessness of his methods to consider serious action. He left a trail that just about anyone could trace here; he also managed to display so many of the traditional signs and to leave such a multitude of clues that even in these modern times a reasonable person could become convinced of what was going on.

Poor old Brodsky—still living in the Middle Ages and behaving just as he did in the days of their population boom. It apparently never occurred to him to consider the mathematics of that sort of thing. He drains a few people he becomes particularly attracted to and they become *nosferatu*. If they feel the same way and behave the same way, they go out and recruit a few more of their caterers. And so on. It's like a chain letter. After a time, everyone would be *nosferatu* and there wouldn't be any caterers left. Then what? Fortunately, nature has ways of dealing with population explosions, even at this level. Still, a sudden rash of recruits in this mass-media age could really mess up the underground ecosystem.

So much for philosophy. Time to get inside and beat the crowd.

I picked up my plastic bag and worked my way out of the shed, cursing softly when I bumped against a post and brought a shower down over me. I made my way through the field then and up to the side door of the old building. It was secured by a rusty padlock, which I snapped and threw into the distant cemetery.

Inside, I perched myself on the sagging railing of the choir section and opened my bag. I withdrew my sketchbook and the pencil I'd brought along. Light leaked in through the broken window to the rear. What it fell upon was mostly trash. Not a particularly inspiring scene. Whatever…I began sketching it. It's always good to have a hobby that can serve as an excuse for odd actions, as an icebreaker…

Ten minutes, I guessed. At most.

Six minutes later, I heard their voices. They weren't particularly noisy, but I have exceptionally acute hearing. There were three of them, as I'd guessed there would be.

They entered through the side door also, slinking, jumpy—looking all about and seeing nothing. At first they didn't even notice me creating art where childish voices had filled Sunday mornings with off-key praise in years gone by.

There was old Dr. Morgan, several wooden stakes protruding from his black bag (I'll bet there was a hammer in there, too—I guess the Hippocratic Oath doesn't extend to the undead—*primum, non nocere*, etc.); and Father O'Brien, clutching his Bible like a shield, crucifix in his other hand; and young Ben Kelman (Elaine's fiancé), with a shovel over his shoulder and a bag from which I suspected the sudden odor of garlic to have its origin.

I cleared my throat, and all three of them stopped, turned, bumped into each other.

"Hi, Doc," I said. "Hi, Father. Ben..."

"Wayne!" Doc said. "What are you doing here?"

"Sketching," I said. "I'm into old buildings these days."

"The hell you are!" Ben said. "Excuse me, Father...You're just after a story for your damned newspaper!"

I shook my head.

"Really I'm not."

"Well, Gus'd never let you print anything about this, and you know it."

"Honest," I said. "I'm not here for a story. But I know why you're here, and you're right—even if I wrote it up, it would never appear. You really believe in vampires?"

Doc fixed me with a steady gaze.

"Not until recently," he said. "But, son, if you'd seen what we've seen, you'd believe."

I nodded my head and closed my sketchpad.

"All right," I replied, "I'll tell you. I'm here because I'm curious. I wanted to see it for myself, but I don't want to go down there alone. Take me with you."

They exchanged glances.

"I don't know..." Ben said.

"It won't be anything for the squeamish," Doc told me.

Father O'Brien just nodded.

"I don't know about having anyone else in on this," Ben added.

"How many more know about it?" I asked.

"It's just us, really," Ben explained. "We're the only ones who actually saw him in action."

"A good newspaperman knows when to keep his mouth shut," I said, "but he's also a very curious creature. Let me come along."

Ben shrugged and Doc nodded. After a moment Father O'Brien nodded too.

I replaced my pad and pencil in the bag and got down from the railing.

I followed them across the church, out into a short hallway, and up to an open, sagging door. Doc flicked on a flashlight and played it upon a rickety flight of stairs leading down into darkness. Slowly then, he began to descend. Father O'Brien followed him. The stairs groaned and seemed to move. Ben and I waited till they had reached the bottom. Then Ben stuffed his bag of pungent groceries inside his jacket and withdrew a flashlight from his pocket. He turned it on and stepped down. I was right behind him.

I halted when we reached the foot of the stair. In the beams from their lights I beheld the two caskets set up on sawhorses, also the thing on the wall above the larger one.

"Father, what is that?" I pointed.

Someone obligingly played a beam of light upon it.

"It looks like a sprig of mistletoe tied to the figure of a little stone deer," he said.

"Probably has something to do with black magic," I offered.

He crossed himself, went over to it and removed it.

"Probably so," he said, crushing the mistletoe and throwing it across the room, shattering the figure on the floor and kicking the pieces away.

I smiled, I moved forward then.

"Let's get the things open and have a look," Doc said.

I lent them a hand.

When the caskets were open, I ignored the comments about paleness, preservation, and bloody mouths. Brodsky looked the same as he always did—dark hair, heavy dark eyebrows, sagging jowls, a bit of a paunch. The girl was lovely, though. Taller than I'd thought, however, with a very faint pulsation at the throat and an almost bluish cast to her skin.

Father O'Brien opened his Bible and began reading, holding the flashlight above it with a trembling hand. Doc placed his bag upon the floor and fumbled about inside it.

Ben turned away, tears in his eyes. I reached out then and broke his neck quietly while the others were occupied. I lowered him to the floor and stepped up beside Doc.

"What—?" he began, and that was his last word.

Father O'Brien stopped reading. He stared at me across his Bible.

"You work for *them*?" he said hoarsely, darting a glance at the caskets.

"Hardly," I said, "but I need them. They're my life's blood."

"I don't understand."

"Everything is prey to something else, and we do what we must. That's ecology. Sorry, Father."

I used Ben's shovel to bury the three of them beneath an earthen section of the floor toward the rear—garlic, stakes, and all. Then I closed the caskets and carried them up the stairs.

I checked around as I hiked across a field and back up the road after the pickup truck. It was still relatively early, and there was no one about.

I loaded them both in back and covered them with a tarp. It was a thirty-mile drive to another ruined church I knew of.

Later, when I had installed them safely in their new quarters, I penned a note and placed it in Brodsky's hand:

> *Dear B,*
>
> *Let this be a lesson to you. You are going to have to stop acting like Bela Lugosi. You lack his class. You are lucky to be waking up at all this night. In the future be more circumspect in your activities or I may retire you myself. After all, I'm not here to serve you.*
>
> *Yours truly,*
> *W*
>
> *P. S. The mistletoe and the statue of Cernunnos don't work anymore. Why did you suddenly get superstitious?*

I glanced at my watch as I left the place. It was eleven fifteen. I stopped at a 7-11 a little later and used their outside phone.

"Hi, Kiela," I said when I heard her voice. "It's me."

"Werdeth," she said. "It's been a while."

"I know. I've been busy."

"With what?"

"Do you know where the old Church of the Apostles out off Route 6 is?"

"Of course. It's on my backup list, too."

"Meet me there at twelve thirty and I'll tell you about it over lunch."

A Word from Zelazny

"Vampire stories have always bothered me because the creatures go about biting people, who then turn into vampires who go about biting people, who… There's a geometrical progression here, and if you stop to think about it, pretty soon we'll all be vampires with no civilians left to bite. The situation always struck me as ecologically unsound, too. There are natural enemies and other limiting factors which control population explosions in other species. If everything were as given in the tradition, there would have to be something else as well. Hence, my modest contribution to the canon of the undead…"[1]

Notes

Nosferatu is another word for vampire. Hippocrates was a Greek physician, considered the father of modern medicine; the **Hippocratic Oath** that physicians may take at medical school graduation is named after him. ***Primum, non nocere***—first (or: above all), do no harm—is a medical school principle (it is not part of the Hippocratic Oath). **Béla Lugosi** was the stage name of Hungarian-born actor Béla Ferenc Dezső Blaskó, who became famous and typecast playing Dracula. The Druids used **mistletoe** (sometimes called the vampire plant) to ward off demons and witches and to confer invulnerability. Hung over a baby's cradle, it prevented kidnapping by fairies. Mistletoe is the only substance than can harm the Norse god Balder. **Cernunnos**, the Horned One, is the Celtic God of the Forest and Prosperity.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

THE BANDS OF TITAN

The Bands of Titan / A Freas Sampler / A Dream of Passion, Per Ardua Ad Astra 1986.

It was like a midnight rainbow—the sunside half of Saturn's rings as viewed from our position above the golden planet's pole. It also sort of reminded me of something else, but metaphors are not my forte and the rainbow had just exhausted my abilities along these lines for a time.

As the great grooved plate with its dark subdivisions rotated beneath our observation vessel and a black band swam through the northern hemisphere of the world below, I heard Sorensen say, above the eerie sounds from the receiver, "We've pinpointed the source now, sir."

I turned and regarded him—young, light-haired, enthusiastic—as he manipulated a paper accordion decorated with machine graffiti.

"Where is it located?" I asked him.

"Near to the inner edge of the C Ring," he stated, "and it's rather small."

"Hm," I observed. "Still no idea what it is, though?"

He shook his head.

"Nope."

There was a kind of strange asynchronous beat behind the wailing, stringy effect coming in over the receiver, and an occasional burst which sounded like a French horn being played in a cave. It was broadcast at an odd frequency, too. In fact, we'd only caught it accidentally, when a micrometeoroid striking an unmanned flyby had thrown the machine's receiver out of whack for a time. Later, we tuned for it. We'd been picking up the sequences for years since then and we were never able to correlate them with any natural phenomena in the vicinity. Running down their source, therefore, had been added to the already lengthy list of experiments and investigations to be conducted on this, the first manned visit to the area.

"McCarthy," I called to the navigator—a short, darkhaired, unenthusiastic man. "Find us an orbit that will take us close enough to this thing to get a good camera fix on it."

"Aye, aye, captain," he said, accepting the papers.

Later, as we jockeyed for the proper plane and accelerated toward the necessary velocity, Sorensen remarked, "Some sort of disturbance on Titan, sir."

"Storm? Ice volcano?" I asked.

"Hard to say," he answered. "I'm only picking it up on visuals. A strong focus of atmospheric turbulence."

I shrugged.

"Storm, probably. Check on it periodically. Let me know if it turns into anything really interesting."

It was the source of the sounds we were tracking which proved the next interesting item we encountered, however. I was dozing on my couch after checking the crew's alcohol rations for spoilage when McCarthy shook me awake.

"You'd better come and take a look at this, captain," he told me.

"What is it?" I mumbled.

"We seem to have located a genuine alien artifact," he said.

I got to my feet and crossed to the viewscreen, where I beheld the thing in full focus. I had no idea as to the scale, but it was a dark metallic satellite; it looked like two squat cones joined together at their bases. It hovered above the ring plane, and its nether vertex glowed with a brilliant light which flashed downward into the ring itself.

"What the hell do you make of it?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he answered. "It's in synchronous orbit—we're matching it now—and that's coherent light shining out of it. It is definitely the source of the broadcast."

I listened again to the sounds, which seemed to be rising to some sort of crescendo.

"Captain!" Sorensen called. "There's more activity on Titan. It's in the upper atmosphere now and—"

"Screw Titan!" I said. "Are you taping *this* thing?"

"Yes, but—"

"Are you monitoring everything that can be monitored concerning it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. We'll talk about Titan later. An alien artifact is infinitely more important than a methane storm."

"Very good, sir."

We watched for hours, and our diligence was rewarded by our witnessing a sudden peculiar maneuver on the part of the device. It was preceded by an abrupt cessation of all broadcast sounds. I had had the stuff pumped into the control room for days, hoping that immersion might stimulate some ideas as to its nature; also, it was not unpleasant in its rising and falling, its unexpected runs and glissandos. When it stopped, I was momentarily overwhelmed by the silence. My attention was quickly taken elsewhere, however, as the light beneath the satellite—which had now advanced itself within the orbit of the C Ring—was suddenly extinguished.

Simultaneous with our remarking upon this, the satellite shot upward—that is, it accelerated in a direction perpendicular to the ring plane.

"Keep a fix on it!" I shouted. "We can't let it get away!"

McCarthy and Sorensen rushed to comply.

Could we ourselves have triggered some damned warning device in it? I wondered.

"It's changing course, sir!" Sorensen yelled.

"Don't lose it, for God's sake!" I cried.

"It seems to be heading in-system," he said later.

"That's something, anyway," I replied. "Once you've established its course, plot one of our own to follow it."

"Right, captain. By the way, Titan—"

"Shove Titan! Follow that satellite!"

This proved less difficult than we had feared, for once the device had crossed the ring-system, it set itself into a new synchronous orbit just beyond the tenuous, braided F Ring. As we tracked and followed, I finally turned to Sorensen and said, "All right. What's the story on Titan?"

He smiled.

"Something in the nature of a large vessel rose above its atmosphere some time ago, sir," he told me. "It is even now headed inward toward Saturn's northern hemisphere."

"What?"

"...Further," he continued, "it appears to be towing a large, flat, circular object of a metallic nature."

"You have a fix on it?"

"Oh, yes. I've been monitoring it, also—on the auxiliaries."

"Let's have a look."

He moved to a sidescreen and began typing at its keyboard.

"There's a particularly good sequence along about here!" he said, as images swam by. He jabbed a key suddenly, and the blur settled into normal time. “There.”

I saw the wedge-shaped ship above the streaked and mottled gold of the planet. Behind it was the enormous disk of which Sorensen had spoken, turning slowly. Several seconds later, the light fell upon it so as to reveal—

Sorensen’s finger stabbed again and the picture froze.

There was an image on the disk. It was that of a gigantic four-eyed face, a pair of short antennae jutting from its high forehead.

I shook my head.

“What is it doing right now?” I asked him.

He switched from the tape to the vessel’s real-time position, spiraling in, far nearer to the planet now.

We waited for a long while as it fitted itself into the proper orbit, achieved the altitude it apparently desired. We waited. It waited.

Much later McCarthy announced, “Something’s happening!”

A fresh surge of adrenaline drove us near to the screen again. The disk had been disengaged from the ship, and as it drifted planetward, the vessel accelerated. Fascinated, we monitored its progress as the disk descended in such a fashion as to disappear entirely into the dark band we had noted earlier. The band narrowed and vanished shortly after that, and the vessel orbited the planet and later cut a course back toward Titan.

“Captain!” McCarthy said. “The artifact!”

“What about it?” I asked, moving to the screen which held its image.

But he did not reply, as I could see it for myself. The device had begun moving once again, crossing the F Ring. After a time it descended to hover above the outermost edge of the A Ring. With a bright flash the laser came on, focused downward into the groove. The one long-silent receiver still set for the thing’s frequency came suddenly alive; its hookup to the ship’s speaker system had not been broken when the satellite went silent. Abruptly now, the speakers brought us the wailing, the crashes, the blaring, the beat.

* * *

Later, when we sent a probe far beneath the murky skies of Titan near to the area from which the wedge-shaped vessel had come and to which it had returned, it sent back pictures: Beneath red clouds, through haze, on the shores of a methane sea, cyclopean figures swayed and spun; blizzards of fiery flakes fell like confetti about them.

A Word from Zelazny

"I once accepted a guest of honorship for a convention in Toronto [Per Ardua Ad Astra, 1986] and was later informed that one of the requirements was that I write them a story for a booklet to be sold to raise money for their favorite charity. This struck me as the equivalent of inviting a painter to dinner and then asking him to paint your wall, in a charitable spirit. I make my living this way, and my writing time is also my income. Fortunately, I suppose, I had a short, light idea about then. And very visual."[1]

Notes

This story first appeared in the triple-signed, limited (203 copy) edition chapbook *The Bands of Titan / A Freas Sampler / A Dream of Passion*, Per Ardua Ad Astra 1986. It includes a sample of artwork by Frank Kelly Freas and a short story by Steven Brust. This is one of the most obscure and highly sought publications with a Zelazny contribution.

In an era of CD players, it may not be obvious that the rings and grooves of Saturn are played like an LP record by the device mentioned in the story. **Bands** in the title is a pun that refers to each of the rings of Saturn, the wavelengths of music coming in over the transmitter, and the LP record-like grooves that are being played. Additional details indicate that the record is being played on a coin-operated jukebox. The Pioneer 11 space probe discovered the **F ring** in 1979; the rings are lettered more or less in the order that they were discovered, and their actual order from Saturn is D, C, B, A, F, G, E. A **glissando** is a rapid series of ascending or descending notes on the musical scale, performed by gliding one or more fingers across piano keys or strings in rapid succession. The dancing **Cyclopean** figures resemble the Cyclopes, Titans who forged thunderbolts for Zeus; each had a single eye in his forehead.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

TO SPIN IS MIRACLE CAT

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

a line of dust behind me
dust beneath my wheels
having lived at all
is miracle cat
and peace is war by other means
said a wise old man
the clarity of the blue curve
overhead the bowstring of day
veed taut the tinny notes
of this my radio the sad call
from the pages of a book
are all if truth be known
I can hold within my head
deer on the mountain
blackbird in the air
the world is circle

and movement I its center rider
and each is something else
by other means dust
beneath the wheels line
behind the car our
paws need licking when we
pause to sort the way
that cat is the quantity
the maximum quantum
leap of dust to blaze
of day starting with eye
sometimes catching language
often losing words to circle
and movement to utter leaves
like trees to spin
is miracle cat

A Word from Zelazny

This is a poem in which punctuation was "subsequently removed as an experiment, & thought…more effective [without] obvious caesurae."[1] **Caesurae** are pauses in lines of poetry.

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[1] *Roger Zelazny*, Jane M. Lindskold, 1993.

EVANGEL

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

The moth,
seeking a gateway to another dimension
where moths wear crowns,
trusts the flickering door atop the pillar.
Have I overlooked the comparison?
You, to whom I address these lines,
have asked for my trust.
I did not crawl out of the cocoon yesterday.
I came to pray; mocking, I stay.

Notes

This poem may be a statement about the hypocrisy of some evangelists. It alludes to but rejects "And fools, who came to scoff, remained to pray," from Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village." **Evangel** means an evangelist. Capitalized, it means Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, writers of the four Gospels. Not capitalized, it means Protestant preachers, especially revivalists.

NIGHT KINGS

Worlds of If, September-November 1986.

It began like any other night, but this one had a special feeling to it. The moon came up full and splendid above the skyline, and its light spread like spilled buttermilk among the canyons of the city. The remains of the day's storm exhaled mists which fled wraithlike across the pavements. But it wasn't just the moon and the fog. Something had been building for several weeks now. My sleep had been troubled. And business was too good.

I had been trying unsuccessfully to watch a late movie and drink one entire cup of coffee without its growing cold. But customers kept arriving, browsers lingered, and the phone rang regularly. I let my assistant, Vic, handle as much of it as he could, but people kept turning up at the counter—never during a commercial.

"Yes, sir? What can I do for you?" I asked a middle-aged man with a slight tic at the left corner of his mouth.

"Do you carry sharpened stakes?" he inquired.

"Yes. Would you prefer the regular or the fire-hardened?"

"The fire-hardened, I guess."

"How many?"

"One. No, better make it two."

"There's a dollar off if you take three."

"Okay, make it three."

"Give you a real good price on a dozen."

"No, three should do it."

"All right."

I stooped and pulled out the carton. Damn. Only two left. I had to pry open another box. At least Vic had kept an eye on the level and brought a second carton up from the stockroom. The boy was learning.

"Anything else?" I asked as I wrapped them.

"Yes," the man said. "I need a good mallet."

"We carry three different kinds, at different prices. The best is a weighted—"

"I'll take the best."

"Very good."

I got him one from beneath the adjacent counter.

"Will this be cash, check, or credit card?"

"Do you take MasterCard?"

"Yes."

He withdrew his wallet, opened it.

"Oh, I also want a pound of garlic," he said as he withdrew the card and handed it to me.

I called to Vic, who was free just then, to fetch the garlic while I wrote up the order.

"Thank you," the man said several minutes later, as he turned and headed for the door, his parcel beneath his arm.

"Good night, good luck," I said, and sounds of distant traffic reached me as the door opened, grew faint when it closed.

I sighted and picked up my coffee cup. I returned to my seat before the television set. Shit. A dental adhesive commercial had just come on. I waited it out, and then there was Bette Davis… Moments later, I heard a throat-clearing sound at my back. Turning, I beheld a tall, dark-haired, dark-mustached man in a beige coat. He was scowling.

"What can I do for you?" I asked him.

"I need some silver bullets," he said.

"What caliber?"

"Thirty-aught-six. Let me have two boxes."

"Coming up."

When he left I walked back to the john and dumped out my coffee. I refilled the cup with fresh brew from the pot on the counter.

On my way back to the comfortable corner of the shop I was halted by a leather-garbed youth with a pink punk haircut. He stood staring up at the tall, narrow, sealed case high upon the wall.

"Hey, Pops, how much is it?" he asked me.

"It's not for sale," I said. "It's strictly a display item."

He dug a massive wad of bills from his side pocket and extended it, his dreamy gaze never leaving the bright thing that hung above.

"I've got to have a magic sword," he said softly.

"Sorry. I can sell you a Tibetan illusion-destroying dagger, but the sword is strictly for looking at here."

He turned suddenly to face me.

"If you should ever change your mind…"

"I won't."

He shrugged then and walked away, passing out into the night.

As I rounded the corner into the front of the shop, Vic fixed me with his gaze and covered the mouthpiece of the phone with the palm of his hand.

"Boss," he told me, "this lady says there's a Chinese demon visits her every night and—"

"Tell her to come by and we'll sell her a bedside temple dog."

"Right."

I took a sip of coffee and made my way back toward my chair as Vic finished the conversation and hung up. A small red-haired woman who had been staring into one of the display cases near the front chose that moment to approach me.

"Pardon me," she said. "Do you carry aconite?"

"Yes, I do—" I began, and then I heard the sound—a sharp *thunk*, as if someone had thrown a rock against my back door.

I had a strong feeling as to what it might be.

"Excuse me," I said, "Vic, would you take care of this lady?"

"Sure thing."

Vic came over then, tall and rugged-looking, and she smiled.

I turned away and passed through the rear of the shop and into the back room. I unlocked the heavy door that let upon the alley and drew it open. As I suspected, there was no one in sight.

I studied the ground. A bat lay twitching feebly near a puddle. I stopped and touched it lightly.

"Okay," I said. "Okay, I'm here. It's all right."

I went back inside then, leaving the door open. As I headed for the refrigerator I called out, "Leo, I give you permission to enter. This one time. This one room and no farther."

A minute later he staggered in. He wore a dark, shabby suit and his shirtfront was dirty. His hair was windblown and straggly and there was a lump on his forehead. He raised a trembling hand.

"Have you got some?" he asked.

"Yeah, here."

I passed him the bottle I had already opened and he took a long drink, then he slowly seated himself in a chair beside the small table. I went back and closed the door, then sat down across from him with my cup of coffee. I gave him a minute for several more swallows and a chance to collect himself.

"Can't even hit a vein right," he muttered, raising the bottle a final time.

Then he put it down, ran his hands through his hair, rubbed his eyes, and fixed me with a baleful gaze.

"I can give you the locations of three who've just moved to town," he said. "What's it worth?"

"Another bottle," I said.

"For three? Hell! I could have brought the information in one at a time and—"

"I don't actively seek out your kind," I told him. "I just provide others with what they need to take care of themselves. I do like having this sort of information, though…"

"I need six bottles."

I shook my head.

"Leo, you take that much and you know what'll happen? You won't make it back and—"

"I want six bottles."

"I don't want to give them to you."

He massaged his temples.

"Okay," he said then. "Supposing I had a piece of important information that affected you personally? A really important piece of information?"

"How important?"

"Like life and death."

"Come on, Leo. You know me, but you don't know me that well. There's not much in this world or any other—"

He said the name.

"What?"

He repeated it, but my stomach was already tightening. "Six bottles," he said.

"Okay. What do you know?"

He looked at the refrigerator. I got up and went to it. I got them out and bagged each one separately. Then I put all of them into a larger brown bag. I brought it over and set it on the floor beside his chair. He didn't even glance downward. He just shook his head.

"If I'm going to lose my connection, this is the way I want it," he stated.

I nodded.

"Tell me now."

"The Man came to town a couple of weeks ago," he said. "He's been looking around. He found you. And tonight's the night. You get hit."

"Where is he?"

"Right now? I don't know. He's coming, though. He called a meeting. Summoned everyone to All Saints across the river. Told us he was going to take you out and make it safe for us, that this was going to be his territory. Told everyone to get busy and keep you busy."

He glanced at the small barred window high on the rear wall.

"I'd better be going," he said then.

I got up and let him out. I watched him stagger away into the fog.

Tonight might well be the night for him too. Hemoholic. A small percentage of them get that way. One neck is never enough. After a while they get so they can't fly straight, and they start waking up in the wrong coffins. Then one morning they just don't make it back to bed in time. I had a vision of Leo sprawled desiccated on a park bench, brown bag clutched to his chest with bony fingers, the first light of day streaming about him.

I locked the door and returned to the shop. It's a cold world out there.

"...horns of the bull for *malocchio*," I heard Vic saying. "That's right. You're welcome. Good-bye."

I kept going, up to the front door. I locked it and switched off the light. I hung the Closed sign in the window.

"What is it?" Vic asked me.

"Turn off the phone."

He did.

Then, "Remember when I told you about the old days?" I said.

"Back when you bound the adversary?"

"Yup. And before that."

"Back when he bound you?"

"Yup. You know, one of these days one of us will win—completely."

"What are you getting at?"

"He's free again and he's coming and I think he's very strong. You may leave now if you wish."

"Are you kidding? You trained me. I'll meet him this time."

I shook my head.

"You're not ready. But if anything happens to me...if I lose...then the job is yours if you'll have it."

"I told you a long time ago, back when I came to work for you—"

"I know. But you haven't finished your apprenticeship and this is sooner than I'd thought it would be. I have to give you a chance to back out."

"Well, I won't."

"Okay, you've been warned. Go unplug the coffeepot and turn out the lights in back while I close down the register."

The room seemed to brighten a bit after he left and I glanced up. It was an effect of diffused moonlight through a full wall of fog that now pressed against the windows. It hadn't been there moments ago.

I counted the receipts and put the money into the bag. I got out the tape.

There was a pounding on the door just as Vic returned. We both looked in that direction.

It was a very young woman, her long blond hair stirred by the wind. She had on a light trench coat and she kept looking back over her shoulder as she hammered on the panel and the pane.

"It's an emergency!" she called out. "I see you in there! Please!"

We both crossed to the door. I unlocked it and opened it.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She stared at me. She made no effort to enter. Then she shifted her gaze to Vic and she smiled slightly. Her eyes were green and her teeth were perfect.

"You are the proprietor," she said to me.

"I am."

"And this…?"

"My assistant—Vic."

"We didn't know you had an assistant."

"Oh," I said. "And you are…?"

"His assistant," she replied.

"Give me his message."

"I can do better than that," she answered. "I am here to take you to him."

She was almost laughing now, and her eyes were harder than I had thought at first. But I had to try.

"You don't have to serve him," I said.

She sobered suddenly.

"You don't understand," she told me. "I have no choice. You don't know what he saved me from. I owe him."

"And he'll have it all back, and more. You can leave him."

"Like I said, I have no choice."

"Yes, you do. You can quit the business right now."

"How?"

I extended my hand and she looked at it.

"Take my hand," I said.

She continued to stare. Then, almost timidly, she raised hers. Slowly, she reached toward mine…

Then she laughed and jerked hers back.

"You almost had me there. Hypnosis, wasn't it?"

"No," I said.

"Well, you won't trick me again."

She turned and swept her left arm backward. The fog opened, forming a gleaming tunnel.

"He awaits you at the other end."

"He can wait a moment longer, then," I told her. "Vic, stay here."

I turned and walked back through the shop. I halted before the case which hung high upon the wall. For a moment I just stared. I could see it so clearly, shining there in the dark. Then I raised the small metal hammer which hung on the chain beside it and I struck.

The glass shattered. I struck twice again and shards kept falling upon the floor. I let go the hammer. It bounced several times against the wall.

Carefully then I reached inside and wrapped my hand about the hilt. The dreaded familiar feeling flowed through me. How long had it been…?

I withdrew it from the case and held it up before me, my ancient strength returning, filling me once again. I had hoped that the last time would indeed be the last time, but these things have a way of dragging on.

When I returned to the storefront, the lady's eyes widened and she drew back a pace.

"All right, Miss," I said. "Lead on."

"Her name is Sabrina," Vic told me.

"Oh? What else have you learned?"

"We will be transported to All Saints Cemetery, across the river."

She smiled at him, then turned toward the tunnel. She stepped into it and I followed her.

It felt like one of those moving walkways the larger airports have. I could tell that every step I took bore me much farther than a single pace. Sabrina strode resolutely ahead, not looking back. Behind me, I heard Vic cough once, the sound heavily muffled within the gleaming, almost plastic-seeming walls.

There was darkness at the end of the tunnel, and a figure waited, even darker, within it.

There was no fog in the place where we emerged, only clear moonlight from amid a field of stars, strong enough to cause the tombstones and monuments to cast shadows. One of these fell between us, a long line of separating darkness, in the cleared area where we stood.

He had not changed so much as I felt I had. He was still taller, leaner and better-looking. He motioned Sabrina off to his right. I sent Vic to the side, also. When he grinned his teeth flashed, and he raised his blade—so black as to be almost invisible within its faint outlining nimbus of orange light—and he saluted me casually with it. I returned the gesture.

"I wasn't certain that you would come," he said.

I shrugged.

"One place is as good as another," I replied.

"I make you the same offer I did before," he stated, "to avoid the nastiness. A divided realm. It may be the best you can hope for."

"Never," I responded.

He sighed.

"You are stubborn."

"And you are persistent."

"If that's a virtue, I'm sorry. But there it is."

"Where'd you find Sabrina?"

"In the gutter. She has real talent. She's learning fast. I see that you have an apprentice now, also. Do you know what this means?"

"Yes, we're getting old, too old for this sort of nonsense."

"You could retire, brother."

"So could you."

He laughed.

"And we could both stagger off arm in arm to that special Valhalla reserved for the likes of us."

"I could think of worse fates," I said.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. I think it means you're getting soft."

"I guess we'll be finding out very soon."

A series of small movements caught my gaze, and I looked past him. Doglike forms and batlike forms and snakelike forms were arriving and settling and moving into position in a huge encircling mass all around us, like spectators coming into a stadium.

"I take it we're waiting for your audience to be seated," I said, and he smiled again.

"Your audience, too," he replied. "Who knows but that even you may have a few fans out there?"

I smiled back at him.

"It's late," he said softly.

"Long past the chimes of midnight."

"Are they really worth it?" he asked then, a sudden serious look upon his face.

"Yes," I replied.

He laughed.

"Of course you have to say that."

"Of course."

"Let's get on with it."

He raised the blade of darkness high above his head and an unearthly silence poured across the land.

"Ashtaroth, Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Belial, Leviathan…," he began.

I raised my own weapon.

"Newton, Descartes, Faraday, Maxwell, Fermi…," I said.

"Lucifer Rofocale," he intoned, "Hecate, Behemoth, Put Satanas, Ariaston…"

"Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rodin, Maillol, Moore…," I continued.

The world seemed to swim about us, and this place was suddenly outside of space and time.

"Mephisto!" he cried out. "Legion! Lilith! Ianoda! Eblis!"

"Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes," I went on.

He struck and I parried the blow and struck one of my own to be parried in turn myself. He continued his chanting and increased the tempo of his attack. I did the same.

After the first several minutes I could see that we were still fairly evenly matched. That meant it would drag on, and on. I tried some tricks I had almost forgotten I knew. But he remembered. He had a few, too, but something in me recalled them also.

We began to move even faster.

The blows seemed to come from every direction, but my blade was there, ready for them when they fell. His had a way of doing the same thing. It became a dance within a cage of shifting metal, row upon row of glowing eyes staring at us across the field of the dead. Vic and Sabrina stood side by side yet seemed oblivious of each other in their concentration upon the conflict.

I hate to say that it was exhilarating, but it was. Finally, to face once again the embodiment of everything I had fought across the years. To have total victory suddenly lie but a stroke away, if but the right stroke might be found…

I redoubled my efforts and actually bore him back several paces. But he recovered quickly and stood his ground then. A sigh rose up from beyond the monuments.

"You can still surprise me," he muttered through clenched teeth, slashing back with a deadly attack of his own. "When will this ever end?"

"How's a legend to know?" I replied, giving ground and striking again.

Our blades fed us the forces we had come to represent and we fought on, and on.

He came close, very close, on several occasions. But each time I was able to spin away at the last moment and counterattack. Twice, I thought that I had him and each time he narrowly avoided me and came on with renewed vigor.

He cursed, he laughed, and I probably did the same. The moon dropped down and sparklets of dew became visible upon the grass. The creatures sometimes shifted about, but their eyes never left us. Vic and Sabrina exchanged several whispered conversations without looking at each other.

I swung a head-cut, but he parried and riposted to my chest. I stopped it and tried for his chest, but he parried…

A breeze sprang up and the perspiration on my brow seemed suddenly cooler. I slipped once on the damp ground and he failed to take advantage of my imbalance. Was he finally tiring?

I tried pressing him once more, and he seemed a bit slower. Was I now gaining an edge or was it a trick on his part, to lull me?

I nicked his biceps. The barest touch. A scratch. Nothing real in the way of an injury, but I felt my confidence rising. I tried again, mustering all of my speed in a fresh burst of enthusiasm.

A bright line appeared across his shirtfront.

He cursed again and swung wildly. As I parried it, I realized that the sky was lightening in the east. That meant I had to hurry. There are rules by which even we are bound.

I spun through my most elaborate attack yet, but he was able to stop it. I tried again, and again. Each time he seemed weaker, and on that last one I had seen a look of pain upon his face. A restlessness came over our gallery then, and I felt that the final sands were about to descend the hourglass.

I struck again, and this time I connected solidly. I felt the edge of my weapon grate against bone as it cut into his left shoulder.

He howled and dropped to his knees as I drew back for the death blow.

In the distance a cock crowed, and I heard him laugh.

"Close, brother! Close! But not good enough," he said. "Sabrina! To me! Now!"

She took a step toward him, turned toward Vic, then back to my fallen nemesis. She rushed to him and embraced him as he began to fade.

"Auf wiedersehen!" he called to me, and they both were gone.

With a great rustling rush then, like blown leaves, our audience departed, flapping through the sky, flashing along the ground, slithering into holes, as the sun cut its way above the horizon.

I leaned upon my blade. In a little while Vic came up to me.

"Will we ever see them again?" he asked.

"Of course."

I began walking toward what I saw to be the distant gate.

"Now what?" he said.

"I'm going home and get a good day's sleep," I told him. "Might even take a little vacation. Business is going to be slow for a while."

We crossed the hallowed earth and exited onto a side street.

A Word from Zelazny

"For a briefly revived *Worlds of If* magazine which appeared in 1986 it was requested that I write a short story. The payment wasn't great, but despite my note for a previous tale ["The Bands of Titan"], I am not totally mercenary. I was sufficiently sentimental to do it, having several fond memories of having written for the magazine in its first incarnation. I decided to try stringing together a number of clichés from the contemporary fantasy scene and turning them into a real story rather than a pastiche, despite.

"Other times, an idea presents itself first and I have to go looking for the characters to run it—as with, say, Night Kings, when everyone in it answered my Help Wanted ad within an hour or so of the idea's arrival. This sort of thing happens often with stories."[1]

Notes

Bette Davis starred in numerous A and B level movies in the 1940s–70s; *All About Eve* is an example. **Wooden stakes** kill vampires, and **garlic** repels them; **silver bullets** kill werewolves; **bedside temple dog** is the Pekingese, originated from the Buddha and bred small to seek out and destroy demons infesting the palace or temple. The Pekingese's heart was big so that it could destroy even the largest and fiercest demons. **Aconite** (also called monk's hood or wolf's bane/wolfsbane) is a plant bearing a poisonous alkaloid that in folklore is a werewolf repellant. **Horns of the bull** or mano cornuto/carnuta is a hand gesture (index and little finger extended, other fingers clenched) used to ward off ***malocchio*** (the "evil eye") and other wickedness. **Valhalla** is Odin's heavenly hall where the souls of heroes slain in battle and others who have died bravely reside.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1986.

The battle in the story is between sorcery and science. The opponent names the demons **Ashtaroth** (Grand Duke of Hell, demon of idleness and sloth), **Beelzebub** (devil next in power to Satan, Prince, demon of pride), **Asmodeus** (demon of luxuriousness, wantonness, lust), **Belial** (demon of arrogance and lust), **Leviathan** (whale-like demon with many heads, demon of envy), **Lucifer Rofocale** (Prime Minister of demons), **Hecate** (goddess of sorcery and witchcraft), **Behemoth** (demon of indulgence), **Put Satanas** (power of Satan), **Ariaston** (unspecified demon), **Mephisto** (Mephistopheles, the destroyer), **Legion** (demons Jesus cast out from a man), **Lilith** (evil desert spirit or Adam's first wife in Hebrew folklore), **Ianoda** (unspecified demon), **Eblis** (fallen angel of Islam, chief of djinns, demon of despair).

The protagonist calls on prominent scientists (**Newton, René Descartes, James Clerk Maxwell, Enrico Fermi**), artists (**Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Auguste Rodin, Aristide Maillol, Henry Moore**), and writers or poets (**Homer, Virgil, Dante Alighieri, William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes**).

Auf wiedersehen! means "farewell" or "until I see you again."

QUEST'S END

Omni, June 1987.

The deed is done. And done pretty well, I might add.

The princess lies dead on the floor of my cave, amid the strewn bones of centuries' worth of heroes, wizards, princes, princesses, dwarfs, and elves, and the fragments of nine broken swords committed to their task—another possible reign of sweetness and joy I've clipped before its bud might unfold.

I run the rasps of my tongue across my fangs, savoring the acrid taste.

The last hero is twisted at an impossible angle in the corner, his magic blade shattered. It was the tenth and final one of that brood of evil piercers forged an age ago by the minions of Light to account for my master and those such as myself who serve him. How delicious! The ring I guard remains in the jeweled cask within the niche at my back.

Pieces of their faithful dwarf companion are strewn along the passageway. I can see the small hand that still holds the ax. Had the little man actually thought he could reach me or do me harm with that pathetic weapon?

Only the old wizard still draws breath. But I have shattered his staff and scattered his power down ways of darkness. I have granted him a few moments more that I might mock him and see him die cursing the powers he had served.

"Do you hear me, Lortan?" I ask.

"Yes, Bactor," he answers weakly from where he fell, his back against the wall to my left, legs thrust at crazy angles. Then, "Why do I still live?" he asks.

"For a bit of terminal amusement, wearer of the Light. If you will curse all that is good and beautiful and true and noble, I will give you a quick death."

"No thanks," he answers.

"Why not? You have failed, as did the nine before you. You were the last. It is over. The good guys lose, ten to nothing."

He does not respond, so I goad him further: "And your hero—Eric Broadthew, or whatever you call him—didn't even touch me with that weapon. The last one at least caught me a good one across the shoulder before I dismembered him."

"We were the worst of the lot you faced?" he inquires.

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," I say. "But you were hardly the best."

"Humor a defeated old man and tell me. Who was the best?"

I chuckle. "Easily done," I answer. "Gloring, of the Second Kingdom. He came so close to killing me that it was beautiful. The arc of his blade, Dammer, came down like a bolt from the heavens. The muscles of his arms rippled like the tides of the sea. He glowed with the sweat of his exertions. He cursed me so wondrously, it was like a poem. I stood transfixed. Barely, only barely did I stop him, and it took all of my dark magic rather than the strength of my body. Verily, it was Gloring and Dammerung who were the greatest."

"Alas, poor Eric could not beat an act like that."

"No, nor any other I have encountered. And now my lord Glaum's reign will never end, for the Darkness has vanquished the Light. There are no more to be raised up against us."

"Of the broken weapons that I see on the floor," he says, "tell me which is the blade Dammer and where the bones of Gloring lie, that I might see where our brightest hope fell."

"You talk too much, old man. It is time to end this conversation."

"But I see only nine hilts amid the ruin."

I extend my claws and rear to strike him. But he holds me, by no magic but by a single statement:

"You have not yet won."

"How can you say that, when you are the last?"

"You lied," he continues, "when you said that your lord's reign will never end, that the Darkness has vanquished the Light. You do not see your own weakness."

"I have no weakness, wizard."

Through the gloom I see his smile.

"Very well," I say then. "You do not have to curse goodness, truth, beauty, and nobility as the price of a quick death. Just tell me of the weakness that you see."

"I have always considered the benefits of a quick death to be somewhat marginal," he replies.

"Tell me, that I may protect myself against its exploitation."

The insolent old man has the audacity to laugh. I resolve to make his death a slow thing, regardless.

"I will tell you," he says, "and you will still be unable to guard against it. I see now that you will die when you know love."

I stamp my foot and roar.

"Love? Love? Your mind is as broken as the rest of you, to accuse me of such a foul failing! Love!"

My laughter rings about the cave as I decapitate him and roll his head back along the passageway, slinging it by the beard. My sides ache from the strain of laughing.

After a time I pick up someone's leg and begin munching on it. Rather tough. Must have been the hero's.

My lord Glaum, always and future ruler of the world, enters that evening wearing his defiled garment of Light, to admire my work, to congratulate me on ages well spent. He gives me a cunningly wrought timepiece of gold with my name engraved upon it, to reward my faithful service.

"Bactor, my lovely," he asks after a time, "why is it that I behold the remains of only nine of the weapons of Light when all of the heroes have fallen?"

I chuckle. "There are only nine here," I explain. "The other is up that side corridor. That hero made a different entrance than the others, and I stopped him there. He was a cunning one."

"I wish to see it for myself."

"Of course, my lord. Follow me."

I lead him up the sideway. I hear him draw a breath as I halt before the niche.

"This one is whole!" he hisses. "The man stands intact, the blade unbroken!"

I laugh again. "But harmless, lord. Now and forever. This one I bound by magic, rather than rending him with the strength of my body. I come here to admire him on occasion. He is the best. He came very close to destroying me."

"Fool!" he cries. "A spell can be broken! And I see that it is Gloring and Dammerung! We must finish them now to assure our triumph!"

He reaches for the death wand in its case upon his belt.

I turn again and regard the point of that blade I had halted but an inch from my breast when my spell froze all motion and left its grinning wielder a statue of judgment and execution forever delayed.

Dammerung's edge is finer than that of any leaf, its point the nearest approach that matter might make to infinity…

I hear my master: "Move away, Bactor."

And I hear another voice—my own—shout the words that break the spell. The delicious thrust is completed, after millennia of delay.

Then it slides from me in a fountain of my body's juices, and I fall backward.

As the beautiful thing, dripping my life, is turned against Glaum, I glance at its wielder, at the whiteness of his lovely face, teeth clenched within its grin…

A Word from Zelazny

"I don't really feel like quoting from *The Masks of God, Hamlet's Mill, The Golden Bough*, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in introducing a story slightly over a thousand words in length. If a book is a machine to think with, though, these are some of the machines I keep running in a back room in the factory of my intellect, and at some time or other everything gets passed through them. Some things get ground away to nothing, some get stuck among the gear teeth, others get turned into stories like this."[1]

Notes

Three books Zelazny mentions deal with origins and interpretation of mythology: Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology;* Giorgio De Santillana's *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and Its Transmission Through Myth;* and Sir James George Frazer's immense, multi-volume work *The Golden Bough.* Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* deals with the subconscious drives that motivate us—including the death instinct: all conscious beings want to return to the earliest state of total inactivity.

Glaum means to grasp at.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

SONG OF THE RING

Niekas #10, Dec 1964.

You wore me like a wound,
from Shire to Khazad-dûm;
you bore me through Moria,
and the place called Shelob's Lair.
Now you stand dismayed,
before the Cracks of Doom.

—Place me on your finger,
and let the world beware!

I wait to wear your finger.
Do not, do not delay!
Even now, the red red eye
is turning, turning—this way!

For I am the Ring of Power—
A whole world lives in me!
I sing with your soul and mind;
I burn eternally.

You are the Lord of the Ring,
and mighty Sauron's bane.
Wear me now, forfend his will,
and his darkling reign!
End it here, begin your own,
revise a world this day—

I am the Ring of the Power
That Will Not Pass Away.

I am the Cry in the Night,
and binder of the Three—
and the Seven, and the Nine—
then Dwarves and Elves
and men to me.
I rule the nineteen Rings,
from here in the Land of Shade.
I am the Wheel of Fire—
Be all the world afraid!

I am the song the Nazgûl sings,
soaring high, on leathern wings;
and I the Shadow, and I the Smoke;
I, the blacking of the day…

Place me on your finger now,
not in the flames below!

Yea! Place me on your finger, Lord,
my worthy Lord of the Rings!

A Word from Zelazny

Zelazny said that Tolkien was his "favorite fantasy author" and that he admired *The Lord of the Rings* "enormously."[1]

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[1] *Nova #1*, June 1972.

DAY OF DOOM

Niekas #16, June 1966.

A very misunderstood person,
Lord Sauron,
did,
in his time,
attempt
an incontrovertibly impossible feat:
i.e., the unification
of all nations and peoples
into a single, world body
(admittedly headed by himself)
for purposes of
eliminating national boundaries,
abolishing war,
and assuring domestic tranquility.

He failed, of course.

It was that damnable Ring
that hung him up.
When cast into the flames
it showed its true colors:
like a donut—
hole surrounded by small substance—
empty as an election promise
or an unloved woman—
it didn't rule and find
or bring or bind:
it flared brightly,

then went out,

taking with it
Lord Sauron,
his mounted police,
his Great Vision,
and the Land of Mordor
where the shadows used to lie,

not to mention
the final gesture
of a finger slowly roasting,
right before the closed-circuit closing
of Mordor's bleak, Big-Brother bloodshot eye.

An Orc band began playing
the Mordorian national anthem
when the lights went out in Khazad-dûm.
Saruman was heard to say,
"Thus does Life repay its patrons."
Gamgee cried.
Gollum fried.
Gandalf blessed the troops.
A sad time was had by the trolls.

A Word from Zelazny

The Lord of the Rings inspired this poem and "Song of the Ring." "I came to J. R. R. Tolkien's books at a very unusual time in my life. But then I guess that everyone who has read them and been moved by them has felt the same way. Perhaps it is because they helped to make it an unusual time. He enriched the entire field of fantastic literature with his great story. He changed many of us who passed through his world. And this is the mark of true power—to makes oneself felt so intensely, so pervasively and with such affection. While I was saddened to hear of his passing, it is good to know that his life was long, long enough for him to feel our appreciation of his work and long enough to realize that so many of us are grateful."[1]

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[1] *Locus #149*, September 15, 1973.

THE SLEEPER

Wild Cards, ed. George R. R. Martin, Bantam 1987.
§ *Wild Cards*

I. The Long Walk Home

He was fourteen years old when sleep became his enemy, a dark and terrible thing he learned to fear as others feared death. It was not, however, a matter of neurosis in any of its more mysterious forms. A neurosis generally possesses irrational elements, while his fear proceeded from a specific cause and followed a course as logical as a geometrical theorem.

Not that there was no irrationality in his life. Quite the contrary. But this was a result, not the cause, of his condition. At least, this is what he told himself later.

Simply put, sleep was his bane, his nemesis. It was his hell on an installment plan.

Croyd Crenson had completed eight grades of school and didn't make it through the ninth. This was not because of any fault of his own. While not at the top of his class he was not at the bottom either. He was an average kid of average build, freckly-faced, with blue eyes and straight brown hair. He had liked to play war games with his friends until the real war ended; then they played cops and robbers more and more often. When it was war he had waited—not too patiently—for his chance to be the ace fighter pilot, Jetboy; after the war, in cops and robbers, he was usually a robber.

He'd started ninth grade, but like many others he never got through the first month: September 1946…

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"What are you looking at?"

He remembered Miss Marston's question but not her expression, because he didn't turn away from the spectacle. It was not uncommon for kids in his class to glance out the window with increasing frequency once three o'clock came within believable distance. It *was* uncommon for them not to turn away quickly, though, when addressed, feigning a final bout of attention while awaiting the dismissal bell.

Instead, he had replied, "The blimps."

In that three other boys and two girls who also had a good line of sight were looking in the same direction, Miss Marston—her own curiosity aroused—crossed to the window. She halted there and stared.

They were quite high—five or six of them, it seemed—tiny things at the end of an alleyway of cloud, moving as if linked together. And there was an airplane in the vicinity, making a rapid pass at them. Black-and-white memories of flashing newsreels, still fresh, came to mind. It actually looked as if the plane were attacking the silver minnows.

Miss Marston watched for several moments, then turned away.

"All right, class," she began. "It's only—"

Then the sirens sounded. Involuntarily, Miss Marston felt her shoulders rise and tighten.

"Air raid!" called a girl named Charlotte in the first row.

"Is not," said Jimmy Walker, teeth braces flashing. "They don't have them anymore. The war's over."

"I know what they sound like," Charlotte said. "Every time there was a blackout—"

"But there's no more war," Bobby Tremson stated.

"That will be enough, class," Miss Marston said. "Perhaps they're testing them."

But she looked back out the window and saw a small flash of fire in the sky before a reef of cloud blocked her view of the aerial conflict.

"Stay in your seats," she said then, as several students had risen and were moving toward the window. "I'm going to check in the office and see whether there's a drill that hadn't been announced. I'll be right back. You may talk if you do it quietly."

She departed, banging the door behind her. Croyd continued to stare at the cloud screen, waiting for it to part again.

"It's Jetboy," he said to Bobby Tremson, across the aisle.

"Aw, c'mon," Bobby said. "What would he be doing up there? The war's over."

"It's a jet plane. I've seen it in newsreels, and that's how it goes. And he's got the best one."

"You're just making that up," Liza called from the rear of the room.

Croyd shrugged.

"There's somebody bad up there, and he's fighting them," he said. "I saw the fire. There's shooting."

The sirens continued to wail. From the street outside came the sound of screeching brakes, followed by the brief hoot of an auto horn and the dull thud of collision.

"Accident!" Bobby called, and everyone was getting up and moving to the window.

Croyd rose then, not wanting his view blocked; because he was near he found a good spot. He did not look at the accident, however, but continued to stare upward.

"Caved in his trunk," Joe Sarzanno said.

"What?" a girl asked.

Croyd heard the distant booming sounds now. The plane was no longer in sight.

"What's the noise?" Bobby asked.

"Antiaircraft fire," Croyd said.

"You're nuts!"

"They're trying to shoot the things down, whatever they are."

"Yeah. Sure. Just like in the movies."

The clouds began to close again. But as they did, Croyd thought that he glimpsed the jet once more, sweeping in on collision course with the blimps. His view was blocked they before he could be sure.

"Damn!" he said. "Get 'em, Jetboy!"

Bobby laughed and Croyd shoved him, hard.

"Hey! Watch who you're pushing!"

Croyd turned toward him, but Bobby did not seem to want to pursue the matter. He was looking out of the window again, pointing.

"Why are all those people running?"

"I don't know."

"Is it the accident?"

"Naw."

"Look! There's another!"

A blue Studebaker had swung rapidly about the corner, swerved to miss the two stopped vehicles, and clipped an oncoming Ford. Both cars were turned at an angle. Other vehicles braked and halted to avoid colliding with them. Several horns began to sound. The muffled noises of antiaircraft fire continued within the wail of the sirens. People were rushing along the streets now, not even pausing to regard the accidents.

"Do you think the war started again?" Charlotte asked.

"I don't know," Leo said.

The sound of a police siren was suddenly mixed with the other noises.

"Jeez!" Bobby said. "Here comes another!"

Before he finished speaking a Pontiac had run into the rear of one of the stopped vehicles. Three pairs of drivers confronted each other on foot; one couple angrily, the others simply talking and occasionally pointing upward. Shortly, they all departed and hurried off along the street.

"This is no drill," Joe said.

"I know," Croyd answered, staring at the area where a cloud had grown pink from the brightness it masked. "I think it's something real bad."

He moved back from the window.

"I'm going home now," he said.

"You'll get in trouble," Charlotte told him.

He glanced at the clock.

"I'll bet the bell rings before she gets back," he answered. "If you don't go now I don't think they'll let you go with whatever that is going on—and I want to go home."

He turned away and crossed to the door.

"I'm going, too," Joe said.

"You'll both get in trouble."

They passed along the hallway. As they neared the front door an adult voice, masculine, called out from up the hall, "You two! Come back here!"

Croyd ran, shouldered open the big green door, and kept going. Joe was only a step behind him as he descended the steps. The street was full of stopped cars now, for as far as he could see in either direction. There were people on the tops of buildings and people at every window, most of them looking upward.

He rushed to the sidewalk and turned right. His home was six blocks to the south, in an anomalous group of row houses in the eighties. Joe's route took him half that way, then off to the east.

Before they reached the corner they were halted as a stream of people flowed from the side street to the right, cutting into their line of pedestrian traffic, some turning north and trying to push through, others heading south. The boys heard cursing and the sound of a fistfight from up ahead.

Joe reached out and tugged at a man's sleeve. The man jerked his arm away, then looked down.

"What's happening?" Joe shouted.

"Some kind of bomb," the man answered. "Jetboy tried to stop the guys who had it. I think they were all blown up. The thing might go off any minute. Maybe atomic."

"Where'd it fall?" Croyd yelled.

The man gestured to the northwest.

"That way."

Then the man was gone, having seen an opening and pushed his way through.

"Croyd, we can get past on the street if we go over the hood of that car," Joe said.

Croyd nodded and followed the other boy across the still-warm hood of a gray Dodge. The driver swore at them, but his door was blocked by the press of bodies and the door on the passenger side could only open a few inches before hitting the fender of a taxi. They made their way around the cab and passed through the intersection at its middle, traversing two more cars on the way.

Pedestrian traffic eased near to the center of the next block, and it looked as if there was a large open area ahead. They sprinted toward it, then halted abruptly.

A man lay upon the pavement. He was having convulsions. His head and hands had swollen enormously, and they were dark red, almost purple in color. Just as they caught sight of him, blood began to rush from his nose and mouth; it trickled from his ears, it oozed from his eyes and about his fingernails.

"Holy Mary!" Joe said, crossing himself as he drew back. "What's he got?"

"I don't know," Croyd answered. "Let's not get too close. Let's go over some more cars."

It took them ten minutes to reach the next corner. Somewhere along the way they noticed that the guns had been silent for a long time, though the air-raid sirens, police sirens, and auto horns maintained a steady din.

"I smell smoke," Croyd said.

"Me, too. If something's burning no fire truck's going to get to it."

"Whole damn town could burn down."

"Maybe it's not all like this."

"Bet it is."

They pushed ahead, were caught in a press of bodies and swept about the corner.

"We're not going this way!" Croyd yelled.

But it did not matter, as the mass of people about them was halted seconds later.

"Think we can crawl through to the street and go over cars again?" Joe asked.

"Might as well try."

They made it. Only this time, as they worked their way back toward the corner it was slower, as others were taking the same route. Croyd saw a reptilian face through a windshield then, and scaly hands clutching at a steering wheel that had been torn loose from its column as the driver slowly slumped to the side. Looking away, he saw a rising tower of smoke from beyond buildings to the northeast.

When they reached the corner there was no place to descend. People stood packed and swaying. There were occasional screams. He wanted to cry, but he knew it would do no good. He clenched his teeth and shuddered.

"What're we going to do?" he called to Joe.

"If we're stuck here overnight we can bust the window on an empty car and sleep in it, I guess."

"I want to go home!"

"Me, too. Let's try and keep going as far as we can."

They inched their way down the street for the better part of an hour, but only made another block. Drivers howled and pounded on windows as they climbed over the roofs of their cars. Other cars were empty. A few others contained things they did not like to look at. Sidewalk traffic looked dangerous now. It was fast and loud, with brief fights, numerous screams, and a number of fallen bodies which had been pushed into doorways or off the curb into the street. There had been a few seconds' hesitation and silence when the sirens had stopped. Then came the sound of someone speaking over a bullhorn. But it was too far away. The words were not distinguishable, except for "bridges." The panic resumed.

He saw a woman fall from a building across the street and up ahead, and he looked away before she hit. The smell of smoke was still in the air, but there were yet no signs of fire in the vicinity. Ahead, he saw the crowd halt and draw back as a person—man or woman, he could not tell—burst into flames in its midst. He slid to the road between two cars and waited till his friend came up.

"Joe, I'm scared shitless," he said. "Maybe we should just crawl under a car and wait till it's all over."

"I've been thinking of that," the other boy replied. "But what if part of that burning building falls on a car and it catches fire?"

"What of it?"

"If it gets to the gas tank and it blows up they'll all go, this close together, like a string of firecrackers."

"Jesus!"

"We've got to keep going. You can come to my place if it seems easier."

Croyd saw a man perform a series of dancelike movements, tearing at his clothing. Then he began to change shape. Someone back up the road started howling. There came sounds of breaking glass.

During the next half-hour the sidewalk traffic thinned to what might, under other circumstances, be called normal. The people seemed either to have achieved their destinations or to have advanced their congestion to some other part of town. Those who passed now picked their way among corpses. Faces had vanished from behind windows. No one was in sight atop the buildings. The sounds of auto horns had diminished to sporadic outbursts. The boys stood on a corner. They had covered three blocks and crossed the street since they had left school.

"I turn here," Joe said. "You want to come with me or you going ahead?"

Croyd looked down the street.

"It looks better now. I think I can make it okay," he said.

"I'll see you."

"Okay."

Joe hurried off to the left. Croyd watched him for a moment, then moved ahead. Far up the street, a man raced from a doorway screaming. He seemed to grow larger and his movements more erratic as he moved to the center of the street. Then he exploded. Croyd pressed his back against the brick wall to his left and stared, heart pounding, but there was no new disturbance. He beard the bullhorn again, from somewhere to the west, and this time its words were more clear: "… The bridges are closed to both auto and foot traffic. Do not attempt to use the bridges. Return to your homes. The bridges are closed…"

He moved ahead again. A single siren wailed somewhere to the east. A low-flying airplane passed overhead. There was a crumpled body in a doorway to his left; he looked away and quickened his pace. He saw smoke across the street, and he looked for the flames and saw then that it rose from the body of a woman seated on a doorstep, her head in her hands. She seemed to shrink as he watched, then fell to her left with a rattling sound. He clenched his fists and kept going.

An Army truck rolled from the side street at the corner ahead of him. He ran to it. A helmeted face turned toward him from the passenger side.

"Why are you out, son?" the man asked.

"I'm going home," he answered.

"Where's that?"

He pointed ahead.

"Two blocks," he said.

"Go straight home," the man told him.

"What's happening?"

"We're under martial law. Everybody's got to get indoors. Good idea to keep your windows closed, too."

"Why?"

"It seems that was some kind of germ bomb that went off. Nobody knows for sure."

"Was it Jetboy that…?"

"Jetboy's dead. He tried to stop them."

Croyd's eyes were suddenly brimming.

"Go straight home."

The truck crossed the street and continued on to the west. Croyd ran across and slowed when he reached the sidewalk. He began to shake. He was suddenly aware of the pain in his knees, where he had scraped them in crawling over vehicles. He wiped his eyes. He felt terribly cold. He halted near the middle of the block and yawned several times. Tired. He was incredibly tired. He began moving. His feet felt heavier than he ever remembered. He halted again beneath a tree. There came a moaning from overhead.

When he looked up he realized that it was not a tree. It was tall and brown, rooted and spindly, but there was an enormously elongated human face near its top and it was from there that the moaning came. As he moved away one of the limbs plucked at his shoulder, but it was a weak thing and a few more steps bore him out of its reach. He whimpered. The corner seemed miles away, and then there was another block…

He had long yawning spells now, and the remade world had lost its ability to surprise him. So what if a man flew through the skies unaided? Or if a human-faced puddle lay in the gutter to his right? More bodies… An overturned car… A pile of ashes… Hanging telephone lines…

He trudged on to the corner. He leaned against the lamppost, then slowly slid down and sat with his back to it. He wanted to close his eyes. But that was silly. He lived right over there. Just a bit more and he could sleep in his own bed.

He caught hold of the lamppost and dragged himself to his feet. One more crossing…

He made it onto his block, his vision swimming. Just a little farther. He could see the door…

He heard the sliding, grating sound of a window opening, heard his name called from overhead. He looked up. It was Ellen, the neighbors' little girl, looking down at him.

"I'm sorry your daddy's dead," she called.

He wanted to cry but he couldn't. The yawning took all of his strength. He leaned upon his door and rang the bell. The pocket with his key in it seemed so far away…

When his brother Carl opened the door, he fell at his feet and found that he could not rise.

"I'm so tired," he told him, and he closed his eyes.

II. The Killer at the Heart of the Dream

Croyd's childhood vanished while he slept, that first Wild Card Day. Nearly four weeks passed before he awoke, and he was changed, as was the world about him. It was not just that he was a half-foot taller, stronger than he had thought anyone could be, and covered with fine red hair. He quickly discovered, also, as he regarded himself in the bathroom mirror, that the hair possessed peculiar properties. Repelled by its appearance, he wished that it were not red. Immediately, it began to fade until it was pale blond in color, and he felt a not-unpleasant tingling over the entire surface of his body

Intrigued, he wished for it to turn green and it did. Again, the tingling, this time more like a wave of vibration sweeping over him. He willed himself black and he blackened. Then pale once more. Only this time he did not halt at light blond. Paler, paler; chalky, albino. Paler still… What was the limit? He began to fade from sight. He could see the tiled wall behind him now, through his faint outline in the mirror. Paler…

Gone.

He raised his hands before his face and saw nothing. He picked up his damp washcloth and held it to his chest. It, too, became transparent, was gone, though he still felt its wet presence.

He returned himself to pale blond. It seemed the most socially acceptable. Then he squeezed into what had been his loosest jeans and put on a green flannel shirt that he could not button all the way. The pants only reached to his shins now. Silently, he padded down the stairs on bare feet and made his way to the kitchen. He was ravenous. The hall clock told him that it was close to three. He had looked in on his mother, his brother, and his sister, but had not disturbed their slumber.

There was a half-loaf of bread in the breadbox and he tore it apart, stuffing great chunks into his mouth, barely chewing before he swallowed. He bit his finger at one point, which slowed him only slightly. He found a piece of meat and a wedge of cheese in the refrigerator and he ate them. He also drank a quart of milk. There were two apples on the countertop and he ate them as he searched the cupboards. A box of crackers. He munched them as he continued his search. Six cookies. He gulped them. A half-jar of peanut butter. He ate it with a spoon.

Nothing. He could find nothing more, and he was still terribly hungry.

Then the enormity of his feast struck him. There was no more food in the house. He remembered the mad afternoon of his return from school. What if there were a food shortage?

What if they were back on rationing? He had just eaten everyone's food.

He had to get more, for the others as well as for himself. He went to the front room and looked out the window. The street was deserted. He wondered about the martial law he had heard of on the way home from school—how long ago? How long had he slept, anyway? He'd a feeling it had been a long while.

He unlocked the door and felt the coolness of the night. One of the unbroken streetlights shone through the bare branches of a nearby tree. There had still been a few leaves on the roadside trees on the afternoon of the troubles. He removed the spare key from the table in the hall, stepped outside, and locked the door behind him. The steps, which he knew must be cold, did not feel particularly chill on his bare feet.

He halted then, retreated into shadow. It was frightening, not knowing what was out there.

He raised his hands and held them up to the streetlight.

"Pale, pale, pale…"

They faded until the light shone through them. They continued to fade. His body tingled.

When they were gone, he lowered his eyes. Nothing of him seemed to remain but the tingle.

Then he hurried up the street, a feeling of enormous energy within him. The odd, treelike being was gone from the next block. The streets were clear for traffic now, though there was considerable debris in the gutters and almost every parked vehicle he saw had sustained some damage. It seemed that every building he passed had at least one window blocked with cardboard or wood. Several roadside trees were now splintered stumps, and the metal signpost at the next corner was bent far to one side. He hurried, surprised at the rapidity of his progress, and when he reached his school he saw that it remained intact, save for a few missing panes of glass. He passed on.

Three grocery stores he came to were boarded up and displayed CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE signs. He broke into the third one. The boards offered very little resistance when he pushed against them. He located a light switch and threw it. Seconds later, he flipped it off. The place was a shambles. It had been thoroughly looted.

He proceeded uptown, passing the shells of several burned-out buildings. He heard voices—one gruff, one high and fluting—from within one of these. Moments later, there came a flash of white light and a scream. Simultaneous with this, a portion of a brick wall collapsed, spilling across the sidewalk at his back. He saw no reason to investigate. It also seemed on occasion that he heard voices from beneath sewer gratings.

He wandered for miles that night, not becoming aware until he was nearing Times Square that he was being followed. At first he thought that it was simply a large dog moving in the same direction he was headed. But when it drew nearer and he noted the human lines to its features, he halted and faced it. It sat down at a distance of about ten feet and regarded him.

"You're one, too," it growled.

"You can see me?"

"No. Smell."

"What do you want?"

"Food."

"Me, too.

"I'll show you where. For a cut."

"Okay. Show me."

It led him to a roped-off area where Army trucks were parked. Croyd counted ten of them. Uniformed figures stood or rested among them.

"What's going on?" Croyd asked.

"Talk later. Food packages in the four trucks to the left."

It was no problem to pass the perimeter, enter the rear of a vehicle, gather an armload of packages, and withdraw in the other direction. He and the dog-man retreated to a doorway two blocks away. Croyd phased back to visibility and they proceeded to gorge themselves.

Afterward, his new acquaintance—who wished to be called Bentley—told him of the events during the weeks following Jetboy's death, while Croyd had slept. Croyd learned of the rush to Jersey, of the rioting, of the martial law, of the Takisians, and of the ten thousand deaths their virus had caused. And he heard of the transformed survivors—the lucky ones and the unlucky ones.

"You're a lucky one," Bentley concluded.

"I don't feel lucky," Croyd said.

"At least you stayed human."

"So, have you been to see that Dr. Tachyon yet?"

"No. He's been so damn busy. I will, though."

"I should, too."

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'?"

"Why should you want to change? You got it made. You can have whatever you want."

"You mean stealing?"

"Times are tough. You get by however you can."

"Maybe so."

"I can put you on to some clothes that will fit you."

"Where?"

"Just around the corner."

"Okay."

It was not difficult for Croyd to break into the rear of the clothing store to which Bentley led him. He faded again after that and returned for another load of food parcels. Bentley padded beside him as he headed home.

"Mind if I keep you company?"

"No."

"I want to see where you live. I can put you on to lots of good things."

"Yeah?"

"I'd like a friend who can keep me fed. Think we can work something out?"

"Yes."

* * *

In the days that followed Croyd became his family's provider. His older brother and sister did not ask whence he acquired the food or, finally, the money he obtained with seeming facility during his nightly absences. Neither did his mother, distracted in her grief over his father's death, think to inquire. Bentley—who slept somewhere in the neighborhood—became his guide and mentor in these enterprises, as well as his confidant in other matters.

"Maybe I should see that doctor you mentioned," Croyd said, lowering the case of canned goods he had removed from a warehouse and perching himself upon it.

"Tachyon?" Bentley asked, stretching himself in an un-doglike fashion.

"Yeah."

"What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep. It's been five days since I woke up this way, and I haven't slept at all since then."

"So? What's wrong with that? More time to do what you want."

"But I'm finally starting to get tired and I still can't sleep."

"It'll catch up with you in time. Not worth bothering Tachyon over. Anyway, if he tries to cure you your chances are only like one in three or four."

"How do you know that?"

"I went to see him."

"Oh?"

Croyd ate an apple. Then, "You going to try it?" he asked.

"If I can get up the nerve," Bentley answered. "Who wants to spend his life as a dog? And not a very good dog, at that. By the way, when we go past a pet shop I want you to break in and get me a flea collar."

"Sure. I wonder… If I do go to sleep, will I sleep a long time like before?"

Bentley tried to shrug, gave up.

"Who knows?"

"Who'll take care of my family? Who'll take care of you?"

"I see the point. If you stop coming out nights, I guess I wait awhile and then go and try the cure. For your family, you'd better pick up a bunch of money. Things will loosen up again, and money always talks."

"You're right."

"You're damn strong. Think you could tear open a safe?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"We'll try one on the way home, too. I know a good place."

"Okay."

"…And some flea powder."

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It was getting on toward morning, as he sat reading and eating, that he began to yawn uncontrollably. When he rose there was a certain heaviness to his limbs that had not been present earlier. He climbed the stairs and entered Carl's room. He shook his brother by the shoulder until he awoke.

"Whassamatter, Croyd?" he asked.

"I'm sleepy."

"So go to bed."

"It's been a long time. Maybe I'll sleep a long time again, too."

"Oh."

"So here's some money, to take care of everybody in case that's what happens."

He opened the top drawer of Carl's dresser and stuffed a huge wad of bills in under the socks.

"Uh, Croyd…Where'd you get all that money?"

"None of your business. Go back to sleep."

He made it to his room, undressed, and crawled into bed. He felt very cold.

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When he awoke there was frost on the windowpanes. When he looked outside he saw that there was snow on the ground beneath a leaden sky. His hand on the sill was wide and swarthy, the fingers short and thick.

Examining himself in the bathroom, he discovered that he was about five and a half feet tall, powerfully built, with dark hair and eyes, and that he possessed hard scarlike ridges on the front of his legs, the outside of his arms, across his shoulders, down his back, and up his neck. It took him another fifteen minutes to learn that he could raise the temperature of his hand to the point where the towel he was holding caught fire. It was only a few more minutes before he discovered that he could generate heat all over, until his entire body glowed—though he felt badly about the footprint that had burned into the linoleum, and the hole his other foot made in the throw rug.

This time, there was plenty of food in the kitchen, and he ate steadily for over an hour before his hunger pangs were eased. He'd put on sweatpants and a sweatshirt, reflecting on the variety of clothing he would have to keep about if he were going to change in form each time that he slept.

There was no pressure on him this time to forage for food. The enormous number of deaths that had occurred following the release of the virus had resulted in a surplus in local warehouses, and the stores were open again with distribution routines back to normal.

His mother was spending most of her time in church, and Carl and Claudia were back in school, which had reopened recently. Croyd knew that he would not be returning to school himself. The money supply was still good, but on reflecting that he had slept nine days longer this time than he had on the previous occasion he felt it would be a good idea to have some extra cash on hand. He wondered whether he could heat a hand sufficiently to burn through the metal door of a safe. He had had a very hard time tearing open that one—had almost given up, actually—and Bentley had assured him that it was a "tin can." He went outside and practiced on a piece of galvanized pipe.

He tried to plan the job carefully, but his judgment was bad. He had to open eight safes that week before he obtained much in the way of money. Most of them just held papers. He knew that he set off alarms also, and this made him nervous; he hoped that his fingerprints changed too when he slept. He worked as quickly as he could and wished that Bentley were back. The dog-man would have known what to do, he felt. He had hinted on several occasions that his normal occupation had involved something somewhat less than legal.

The days passed more quickly than he would have wished. He purchased a large, all-purpose wardrobe. Nights, he walked the city, observing the signs of damage that still remained and the progress of repair work. He caught up on the news, of the city, the world. It was not hard to believe in a man from outer space when the results of his virus were all about him. He asked a bullet-domed man with webbed fingers where he might find Dr. Tachyon. The man gave him an address and a phone number. He kept them in his wallet and did not call or visit. What if the doctor examined him, told him there was no problem, and cured him? Nobody else in the family was able to make a living at this point.

The day came when his appetite peaked again, which he felt might mean that his body was getting ready for another change. This time, he observed his feelings more carefully for future reference. It took him the rest of that day and night, and part of the next day before the chills came and the waves of drowsiness began. He left a note saying good night to the others, for they were out when the feeling began to overwhelm him. And this time he locked his bedroom door, for he had learned that they had observed him regularly as he slept, had even brought in a doctor at one point—a woman who had prudently recommended that they simply let him sleep, once she learned his case history. She had also suggested that he see Dr. Tachyon when he awoke but his mother had misplaced the paper on which she had written this. Mrs. Crenson's mind seemed to wander often these days.

He had the dream again—and this time he realized that it was *again*—and this was the first time that he remembered it: The apprehension was reminiscent of his feelings on the day of his last return home from school. He was walking down what seemed an empty twilit street. Something stirred behind him and he turned and looked back. People were emerging from doorways, windows, automobiles, manholes, and all of them were staring at him, moving toward him. He continued on his way and there came something like a collective sigh at his back. When he looked again they were all hurrying after him in a menacing fashion, expressions of hatred on their faces. He began to run, with a certainty that they intended his destruction. They pursued him…

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When he awoke he was hideous, and he had no special powers. He was hairless, snouted, and covered with gray-green scales; his fingers were elongated and possessed of extra joints, his eyes yellow and slitted; he developed pains in his thighs and lower back if he stood upright for too long. It was far easier to go about his room on all fours. When he exclaimed aloud over his condition there was a pronounced sibilance to his speech.

It was early evening, and he heard voices from downstairs. He opened the door and called out, and Claudia and Carl both hurried to his room. He opened the door the barest crack and remained behind it.

"Croyd! Are you all right?" Carl asked.

"Yes and no," he hissed. "I'll be okay. Right now I'm starving. Bring me food. Lots of it."

"What's the matter?" Claudia asked. "Why won't you come out?"

"Later! Talk later. Food now!"

He refused to leave his room or to let his family see him. They brought him food, magazines, newspapers. He listened to the radio and paced, quadrupedally. This time, sleep was something to be courted rather than feared. He lay back on the bed, hoping it would come soon. But it was denied him for the better part of a week.

The next time he woke he found himself slightly over six feet tall, dark-haired, slim, and not unpleasantly featured. He was as strong as he had been on earlier occasions, but after a while he concluded that he possessed no special powers—until he slipped on the stair in his rush to the kitchen and saved himself by levitating.

Later, he noticed a note in Claudia's handwriting, tacked to his door. It gave a phone number and told him he could reach Bentley there. He put it in his wallet. He'd another call to make first.

◆ ◆ ◆

Dr. Tachyon looked up at him and smiled faintly.

"It could be worse," he said.

Croyd was almost amused at the judgment.

"How?" he asked.

"Well, you could have drawn a joker."

"Just what did I draw, sir?"

"Yours is one of the most interesting cases I've seen so far. In all of the others it's simply run its course and either killed the person or changed him—for better or worse. With you—Well, the nearest analogy is an Earth disease called malaria. The virus you harbor seems to reinfect you periodically."

"I drew a joker once…"

"Yes, and it could happen again. But unlike anyone else to whom it's happened, all you have to do is wait. You can sleep it off."

"I don't ever want to be a monster again. Is there some way you could change just that much of it?"

"I'm afraid not. It's part of your total syndrome. I can only go after the whole thing."

"And the odds against a cure are three or four to one?"

"Who told you that?"

"A joker named Bentley. He looked sort of like a dog."

"Bentley was one of my successes. He's back to normal now. Just left here fairly recently, in fact."

"Really! It's good to know that someone made it."

Tachyon looked away.

"Yes," he answered, a moment later.

"Tell me something."

"What?"

"If I only change when I sleep, then I could put off a change by staying awake—right?"

"I see what you mean. Yes, a stimulant would put it off a bit. If you feel it coming on while you're out somewhere, the caffeine in a couple of cups of coffee would probably hold it off long enough for you to get back home."

"Isn't there something stronger? Something that would put it off for a longer time?"

"Yes, there are powerful stimulants—amphetamines, for example. But they can be dangerous if you take too many or take them for too long."

"In what ways are they dangerous?"

"Nervousness, irritability, combativeness. Later on, a toxic psychosis, with delusions, hallucinations, paranoia."

"Crazy?"

"Yes."

"Well, you could just stop them if it gets near that point, couldn't you?"

"I don't believe it's that easy—"

"I'd hate to be a monster again, or—You didn't say it, but isn't it possible that I could just die during one of the comas?"

"There is that possibility. It's a nasty virus. But you've come through several attacks now, which leads me to believe that your body knows what it is doing. I wouldn't worry myself unduly on that..."

"It's the joker part that really bothers me."

"That is a possibility you simply have to live with."

"All right. Thank you, Doctor."

"I wish you would come to Mt. Sinai the next time you feel it coming on. I'd really like to observe the process in you."

"I'd rather not."

Tachyon nodded.

"Or right away after you awaken...?"

"Maybe," Croyd said, and he shook his hand. "By the way, Doctor...How do you spell 'amphetamine'?"

❖ ❖ ❖

Croyd stopped by the Sarzannos' apartment later, for he had not seen Joe since that day in September when they had made their way home from school together, the exigencies of making a living having limited his spare time since then.

Mrs. Sarzanno opened the door a crack and stared at him. After he had identified himself and tried to explain his changed appearance, she still refused to open the door farther.

"My Joe, he is changed, too," she said.

"Uh, how is he changed?" he asked.

"Changed. That's all. Changed. Go away."

She closed the door.

He knocked again, but there was no response.

Croyd went away then and ate three steaks, because there was nothing else he could do.

❖ ❖ ❖

Croyd studied Bentley—a small foxy-featured man with dark hair and shifty eyes—feeling that his earlier transformation had actually been in keeping with his general demeanor. Bentley returned the compliment for several seconds, then said, "That's really you, Croyd?"

"Yep."

"Come on in. Sit down. Have a beer. We've got a lot to talk about."

He stepped aside, and Croyd entered the brightly furnished apartment.

"I got cured and I'm back in business. Business is lousy," Bentley said, after they had seated themselves. "What's your story?"

Croyd told him of the changes and powers he'd experienced and of his talk with Tachyon. The one thing he never told him was his age, since all of his transformations bore the appearance of adulthood. He feared that Bentley might not trust him in the same fashion as he had if he knew otherwise.

"You went about those other jobs wrong," the small man said, lighting a cigarette and coughing. "Hit or miss is never good. You want a little planning, and it should be tailored to whatever your special talent is, each time around. Now, you say that this time you can fly?"

"Yes."

"Okay. There are lots of places high up in skyscrapers that people think are pretty secure. This is the time we hit those. You know, you've got the best setup of anyone there is. Even if someone sees you, it don't matter. You're going to look different next time around…"

"And you'll get me the amphetamines?"

"All you want. You come back here tomorrow—same time, same station. Maybe I'll have a job worked out for us. And I'll have your pills for you."

"Thanks, Bentley."

"It's the least I can do. If we stick together we'll both get rich."

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Bentley did plan a good job, and three days later Croyd brought home more money than he had ever held before. He took most of it to Carl, who had been handling the family's finances.

"Let's take a walk," Carl said, securing the money behind a row of books and glancing significantly toward the living room where their mother sat with Claudia.

Croyd nodded.

"Sure."

"You seem a lot older these days," said Carl—who would be eighteen in a few months—as soon as they were on the street.

"I feel a lot older."

"I don't know where you keep getting the money…"

"Better you don't."

"Okay. I can't complain, since I'm living off it, too. But I wanted you to know about Mom. She's getting worse. Seeing Dad torn apart that way… She's been slipping ever since. You missed the worst of it so far, the last time you were asleep. Three different nights she just got up and went outside in her nightgown—barefoot yet, in February, for crissake!—and she wandered around like she was looking for Dad. Fortunately, someone we knew spotted her each time and brought her back. She kept asking her—Mrs. Brandt—if she'd seen him. Anyhow, what I'm trying to say is she's getting worse. I've already talked to a couple of doctors. They think she should be in a rest home for a while. Claudia and I think so, too. We can't watch her all the time, and she might get hurt. Claudia's sixteen now. The two of us can run things while she's away. But it's going to be expensive."

"I can get more money," Croyd said.

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When he finally got hold of Bentley the following day and told him that they had to do another job soon, the small man seemed pleased, for Croyd had not been eager for a quick follow-up to the last one.

"Give me a day or so to line something up and work out the details," Bentley said. "I'll get back to you."

"Right."

The next day Croyd's appetite began to mount, and he found himself yawning occasionally. So he took one of the pills.

It worked well. Better than well, actually. It was a fine feeling that came over him. He could not recall the last time he'd felt quite that good. Everything seemed as if it were going right for a change. And all of his movements felt particularly fluid and graceful. He seemed more alert, more aware than usual, also. And, most importantly, he was not sleepy.

It was not until nighttime, after everyone else had retired, that these feelings began to wear off. He took another pill. When it began to work he felt so fine that he went outside and levitated high above the city, drifting in the cold March night between the bright constellations of the city and those far above, feeling as if he possessed a secret key to the inner meaning of it all. Briefly, he thought of Jetboy's battle in the sky, and he flew over the remains of the Hudson Terminal which had burned when pieces of Jetboy's plane fell upon it. He had read of a plan to build a monument to him there. Was this how it felt when he fell?

He descended to swoop among buildings—sometimes resting atop one, leaping, falling, saving himself at the last moment. On one such occasion, he beheld two men watching him from a doorway. For some reason that he did not understand, this irritated him. He returned home then and began cleaning the house. He stacked old newspapers and magazines and tied them into bundles, he emptied wastebaskets, he swept and mopped, he washed all of the dishes in the sink. He flew four loads of trash out over the East River and dropped them in, trash collections still not being quite regular. He dusted everything, and dawn found him polishing the silverware. Later, he washed all of the windows.

It was quite sudden that he found himself weak and shaking. He realized what it was and he took another pill and set a pot of coffee to percolating. The minutes passed. It was hard to remain seated, to be comfortable in any position. He did not like the tingling in his hands. He washed them several times, but it would not go away. Finally, he took another pill. He watched the clock and listened to the sounds of the coffeepot. Just as the coffee became ready the tingling and the shaking began to subside. He felt much better. While he was drinking his coffee he thought again of the two men in the doorway. Had they been laughing at him? He felt a quick rush of anger, though he had not really seen their faces, known their expressions. Watching him! If they'd had more time they might have thrown a rock…

He shook his head. That was silly. They were just two guys. Suddenly, he wanted to run outside and walk all over the city, or perhaps fly again. But he might miss Bentley's call if he did. He began pacing. He tried to read but was unable to focus his attention as well as usual. Finally, he phoned Bentley.

"Have you come up with anything yet?" he asked.

"Not yet, Croyd. What's the rush?"

"I'm starting to get sleepy. You know what I mean?"

"Uh—yeah. You take any of that shit yet?"

"Uh-huh. I had to."

"Okay. Look, go as light on it as possible. I'm working on a couple angles now. I'll try to have something lined up by tomorrow. If it's no go then, you stop taking the stuff and go to bed. We can do it next time. Got me?"

"I want to do it this time, Bentley."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow. You take it easy now."

He went out and walked. It was a cloudy day, with patches of snow and ice upon the ground. He realized suddenly that he had not eaten since the day before. That had to be bad, when he considered what had become his normal appetite. It must be the pills' doing, he concluded. He sought a diner, determined to force himself to eat something. As he walked, it occurred to him that he did not care to sit down in a crowd of people and eat. The thought of having all of them around him was unsettling. No, he would get a carryout order…

As he headed toward a diner he was halted by a voice from a doorway. He turned so quickly that the man who had addressed him raised an arm and drew back.

"Don't…" the man protested.

Croyd took a step back.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

The man had on a brown coat, its collar turned all the way up. He wore a hat, its brim drawn about as low as it would go and still permit vision. He kept his head inclined forward. Nevertheless, Croyd discerned a hooked beak, glittering eyes, an unnaturally shiny complexion.

"Would you do me a favor, sir?" the man asked in a clipped, piping voice.

"What do you want?"

"Food."

Automatically, Croyd reached for his pocket.

"No. I got money. You don't understand. I can't go in that place and get served, looking like I do. I'll pay you to go in and get me a couple hamburgers, bring them out."

"I was going in anyway."

Later, Croyd sat with the man on a bench, eating. He was fascinated by—jokers. Because he knew he was partly one himself. He began wondering where he would eat if he ever woke up in bad shape and there was nobody home.

"I don't usually come this far uptown anymore," the other told him. "But I had an errand."

"Where do you guys usually hang out?"

"There's a number of us down on the Bowery. Nobody bothers us there. There's places you get served and nobody cares what you look like. Nobody gives a damn."

"You mean people might—attack you?"

The man uttered a brief, shrill laugh.

"People ain't real nice, kid. Not when you really get to know 'em."

"I'll walk you back," Croyd said.

"You might be taking a chance."

"That's okay."

It was down in the forties that three men on a bench stared at them as they passed. Croyd had just taken two more pills a few blocks back. (Was it only a few blocks back?) He hadn't wanted the jitters again while talking with his new friend John—at least, that's what he'd said to call him—so he'd taken two more to ease him over the next hump, in case one was due soon, and he knew right away when he saw the two men that they were planning something bad for him and John, and the muscles in his shoulders tightened and he rolled his hands into fists within his pockets.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo," said one of the men, and Croyd started to turn, but John put his hand on his arm and said, "Come on."

They walked on. The men rose and fell into step behind them.

"Kirkiriki," said one of the men.

"Squak, squak," said another.

Shortly, a cigarette butt sailed over Croyd's head and landed in front of him.

"Hey, freak lover!"

A hand fell upon his shoulder.

He reached up, took hold of the hand, and squeezed. Bones made little popping noises within it as the man began to scream. The screaming stopped abruptly when Croyd released the hand and slapped the man across the face, knocking him into the street. The next man threw a punch at his face and Croyd knocked the arm aside with a flick of his hand that spun the man full-face toward him. He reached out then with his left hand, caught hold of both the other's lapels, bunching them, twisting them, and raised the man two feet into the air. He slammed him back against the brick wall near which they stood and released him. The man slumped to the ground and did not move.

The final man had drawn a knife and was swearing at him through clenched teeth. Croyd waited until he was almost upon him, and then levitated four feet and kicked him in the face. The man went over backward onto the sidewalk. Croyd drifted into position above him then and dropped, landing upon his midsection. He kicked the fallen knife into the gutter, turned away, and walked on with John.

"You're an ace," the smaller man said after a while.

"Not always," Croyd replied. "Sometimes I'm a joker. I change every time I sleep."

"You didn't have to be that rough on them."

"Right. I could have been a lot rougher. If it's really going to be like this we should take care of each other."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Listen, I want you to show me the places on the Bowery where you say nobody bothers us. I may have to go there someday."

"Sure. I'll do that."

"Croyd Crenson. C-r-e-n-s-o-n. Remember it, okay? If you see me again I'll look different, that's why."

"I'll remember."

John took him to several dives and pointed out places where some of them stayed. He introduced him to six jokers they encountered, all of them savagely deformed. Remembering his lizard phase, Croyd shook appendages with all of them and asked if there was anything they needed. But they shook their heads and stared. He knew that his appearance was against him.

"Good evening," he said, and he flew away.

* * *

His fear that the uninfected survivors were watching him, waiting to jump him, grew as he flew up along the course of the East River. Even now, someone with a rifle with telescopic sights might be taking aim…

He moved faster. On one level, he knew that his fear was ridiculous. But he felt it too strongly to put it aside. He landed on the corner, ran to his front door, and let himself in. He hurried upstairs and locked himself in his bedroom.

He stared at the bed. He wanted to stretch out on it. But what if he slept? It would be all over. The world would end for him. He turned on the radio and began to pace. It was going to be a long night…

When Bentley called the next day and said that he had a hot one but that it was a little risky, Croyd said he didn't care. He would have to carry explosives—which meant he would have to learn to use them between now and then—because this safe would be too tough even for his enhanced strength. Also, there was the possibility of an armed guard…

* * *

He didn't mean to kill the guard, but the man had frightened him when he came in with a drawn gun that way. And he must have miscalculated on the fuse, because the thing blew before it should have, which is how the piece of flying metal took off the first two fingers of his left hand. But he wrapped the hand in his handkerchief and got the money and got out.

He seemed to remember Bentley's saying, "For crissake, kid! Go home and sleep it off!" right after they split the take. He levitated then and headed in the proper direction, but he had to descend and break into a bakery where he ate three loaves of bread before he could continue, his mind reeling. There were more pills in his pocket, but the thought of them tied his stomach into a knot.

He slid open his bedroom window, which he had left unlatched, and crawled inside. He staggered up the hall to Carl's room and dumped the sack of money onto his sleeping form. Shaking then, he returned to his own room and locked the door. He switched on the radio. He wanted to wash his injured hand in the bathroom, but it just seemed too far away.

He collapsed onto the bed and did not rise.

* * *

He was walking down what seemed an empty twilit street. Something stirred behind him and he turned and looked back. People were emerging from doorways, windows, automobiles, manholes, and all of them were staring at him, moving toward him. He continued on his way and there came something like a collective sigh at his back. When he looked again they were all hurrying after him, expressions of hatred on their faces. He turned upon them, seized hold of the nearest man and strangled him. The others halted, drew back. He crushed another man's head. The crowd turned, began to flee. He pursued…

III. Day of the Gargoyle

Croyd awoke in June, to discover that his mother was in a sanatorium, his brother had graduated high school, his sister was engaged, and he had the power to modulate his voice in such a fashion as to shatter or disrupt virtually anything once he had determined the proper frequency by a kind of resonant feedback that he lacked the vocabulary to explain. Also, he was tall, thin, dark-haired, sallow, and had regrown his missing fingers.

Foreseeing the day when he would be alone, he spoke with Bentley once again, to line up one big job for this waking period, and to get it over with quickly, before the weariness overcame him. He had resolved not to take the pills again, as he had thought back over the nightmare quality of his final days the last time around.

This time he paid even more attention to the planning and he asked better questions as Bentley chain-smoked his way through a series of details. The loss of both his parents and his sister's impending marriage had led him to reflect upon the impermanence of human relationships, with the realization that Bentley might not always be around.

He was able to disrupt the alarm system and damage the door to the bank's vault sufficiently to gain entrance, though he had not counted on shattering all of the windows in a three-block area while seeking the proper frequencies. Still, he was able to make good his escape with a large quantity of cash. This time he rented a safe-deposit box in a bank across town, where he left the larger portion of his share. He had been somewhat bothered by the fact that his brother was driving a new car.

He rented rooms in the Village, Midtown, Morningside Heights, the Upper East Side, and on the Bowery, paying all of the rents for a year in advance. He wore the keys on a chain around his neck, along with the one for his safe-deposit box. He wanted places he could reach quickly no matter where he was when the sleep came for him. Two of the apartments were furnished; the other four he equipped with mattresses and radios. He was in a hurry and could take care of amenities later. He had awakened with an awareness of several events that had transpired during his most recent sleep, and he could only attribute it to an unconscious apprehension of news broadcasts from the radio he had left playing this last time. He resolved to continue the practice.

It took him three days to locate, rent, and equip his new retreats. In that his place on the Bowery was his last one, he looked up John, identified himself, and had dinner with him. The stories he heard then of a gang of joker-bashers depressed him, and when the hunger and the chill and the drowsiness came upon him that evening he took a pill so as to stay awake and patrol the area. Just one or two, he decided, would hardly matter.

The bashers did not show up that night, but Croyd was depressed by the possibility that he might awaken as a joker the next time around. So he took two more pills with his breakfast to put things off a bit, and he decided to furnish his local quarters in the fit of energy that followed. That evening he took three more for a last night on the town, and the song he sang as he walked along Forty-second Street, shattering windows building by building, caused dogs to howl for several miles around and awakened two jokers and an ace equipped with UHF hearing. Bat-ears Brannigan—who expired two weeks later beneath a falling statue thrown by Muscles Vincenzi the day he was gunned down by the NYPD—sought him out to pound on him in payment for his headache and wound up buying him several drinks and requesting a soft UHF version of "Galway Bay."

The following afternoon on Broadway, Croyd responded to a taxi driver's curse by running his vehicle through a series of vibrations until it fell apart. Then, while he was about it, he turned the force upon all of those others who had proven themselves enemies by blowing their horns. It was only when the ensuing traffic snarl reminded him of the one outside his school on that first Wild Card Day that he turned and fled.

He awoke in early August in his Morningside Heights apartment, recalling slowly how he had gotten there and promising himself he would not take any more pills this time. When he looked at the tumors on his twisted arm he knew that the promise would not be hard to keep. This time he wanted to return to sleep as quickly as possible. Looking out the window, he was grateful that it was night, since it was a long way to the Bowery.

* * *

On a Wednesday in mid-September he woke to find himself dark blond, of medium height, build, and complexion, and possessed of no visible marks of his wild card syndrome. He ran himself through a variety of simple tests that experience had taught him were likely to reveal his hidden ability. Nothing in the way of a special power came to light.

Puzzled, he dressed himself in the best-fitting clothing he had on hand and went out for his usual breakfast. He picked up several newspapers along the way and read them while he devoured plate after plate of scrambled eggs, waffles, pancakes. It had been a chill morning when he'd entered the street. When he left the diner it was near to ten o'clock and balmy.

He rode the subways to midtown, where he entered the first decent-looking clothing store he saw and completely refitted himself. He bought a pair of hot dogs from a street vendor and ate them as he walked to the subway station.

He got off in the seventies, walked to the nearest delicatessen, and ate two corned beef sandwiches with potato pancakes. Was he stalling? he asked himself then. He knew that he could sit here all day and eat. He could feel the process of digestion going on like a blast furnace in his midsection.

He rose, paid, and departed. He would walk the rest of the way. How many months had it been? he wondered, scratching his forehead. It was time to check in with Carl and Claudia. Time to see how Mom was doing. To see whether anybody needed any money.

* * *

When Croyd came to his front door he halted, key in his hand. He returned the key to his pocket and knocked. Moments later, Carl opened the door.

"Yes?" he said.

"It's me. Croyd."

"Croyd! Jeez! Come in! I didn't recognize you. How long's it been?"

"Pretty long."

Croyd entered.

"How is everybody?" he asked.

"Mom's still the same. But you know they told us not to get our hopes up."

"Yeah. Need any money for her?"

"Not till next month. But a couple of grand would come in handy then."

Croyd passed him an envelope.

"I'd probably just confuse her if I went to see her, looking this different."

Carl shook his head.

"She'd be confused even if you looked the same as you did, Croyd."

"Oh."

"Want something to eat?"

"Yeah. Sure."

His brother led him to the kitchen.

"Lots of roast beef here. Makes a good sandwich."

"Great. How's business?"

"Oh, I'm getting established now. It's better than it was at first."

"Good. And Claudia?"

"It's good you turned up when you did. She didn't know where to send the invitation."

"What invitation?"

"She's getting married Saturday."

"That guy from Jersey?"

"Yeah. Sam. The one she was engaged to. He manages a family business. Makes pretty good money."

"Where'll the wedding be?"

"In Ridgewood. You come with me for it. I'm driving over."

"Okay. I wonder what kind of present they'd like?"

"They've got this list. I'll find it."

"Good."

* * *

Croyd went out that afternoon and bought a Dumont television set with a sixteen-inch screen, paid cash, and arranged for its delivery to Ridgewood. He visited with Bentley then, but declined a somewhat-risky-sounding job because of his apparent lack of special talent this time around. Actually, it was a good excuse. He didn't really want to work anyway, to take a chance on getting screwed up—physically or with the law—this close to the wedding.

He had dinner with Bentley in an Italian restaurant, and they sat for several hours afterward over a bottle of Chianti, talking shop and looking ahead as Bentley tried to explain to him the value of long-range solvency and getting respectable one day—a thing he'd never quite managed himself.

He walked most of the night after that, to practice studying buildings for their weak points, to think about his changed family. Sometime after midnight, as he was passing up Central Park West, a strong itching sensation began on his chest and spread about his entire body. After a minute, he had to halt and scratch himself violently. Allergies were becoming very fashionable about this time, and he wondered whether his new incarnation had brought him a sensitivity to something in the park.

He turned west at the first opportunity and left the area as quickly as possible. After about ten minutes the itching waned. Within a half-hour it had vanished completely. His hands and face felt as if they were chapped, however.

At about four in the morning he stopped in an all-night diner on Times Square, where he ate slowly and steadily and read a copy of *Time* magazine which someone had left in a booth. Its medical section contained an article on suicide among jokers, which depressed him considerably. The quotations it contained reminded him of things he had heard said by many people with whom he was acquainted, causing him to wonder whether any of them were among the interviewees. He understood the feelings too well though he could not share them fully, knowing that no matter what he drew he would always be dealt a new wild card the next time around—and that more often than not it was an ace.

All of his joints creaked when he rose, and he felt a sharp pain between his shoulder blades. His feet felt swollen, also.

He returned home before daybreak, feeling feverish. In the bathroom, he soaked a washcloth to hold against his forehead. He noted in the mirror that his face seemed swollen. He sat in the easy chair in his bedroom until he heard Carl and Claudia moving about. When he rose to join them for breakfast his limbs felt leaden, and his joints creaked again as he descended the stairway.

Claudia, slim and blond, embraced him when he entered the kitchen. Then she studied his new face.

"You look tired, Croyd," she said.

"Don't say that," he responded. "I can't get tired this soon. It's two days till your wedding, and I'm going to make it."

"You can rest without sleeping, though, can't you?"

He nodded.

"Then, take it easy. I know it must be hard… Come on, let's eat."

As they were sipping their coffee, Carl asked, "You want to come into the office with me, see the setup I've got now?"

"Another time," Croyd answered. "I've got some errands."

"Sure. Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe so."

Carl left shortly after that. Claudia refilled Croyd's cup.

"We hardly see you anymore," she said.

"Yeah. Well, you know how it is. I sleep—sometimes months. When I wake up I'm not always real pretty. Other times, I have to hustle to pay the bills."

"We've appreciated it," she said. "It's hard to understand. You're the baby, but you look like a grown man. You act like one. You didn't get your full share of being a kid."

He smiled.

"So what are you—an old lady? Here you are just seventeen, and you're getting married."

She smiled back.

"He's a nice guy, Croyd. I know we're going to be happy."

"Good. I hope so. Listen, if you ever want to reach me I'm going to give you the name of a place where you can leave a message. I can't always be prompt, though."

"I understand. What is it that you do, anyway?"

"I've been in and out of a lot of different businesses. Right now I'm between jobs. I'm taking it easy this time, for your wedding. What's he like, anyhow?"

"Oh, very respectable and proper. Went to Princeton. Was a captain in the Army."

"Europe? The Pacific?"

"Washington."

"Oh. Well-connected."

She nodded.

"Old family," she said.

"Well…Good," he said. "You know I wish you happiness."

She rose and embraced him again.

"I've missed you," she said.

"Me, too."

"I've got errands to run, too, now. I'll see you later."

"Yes."

"You take it easy today."

When she left he stretched his arms as far as they would go, trying to relieve the ache in his shoulders. His shirt tore down the back as he did this. He looked in the hall mirror. His shoulders were wider today than they had been yesterday. In fact, his entire body looked wider, huskier. He returned to his room and stripped. Most of his torso was covered with a red rash. Just looking at it made him want to scratch, but he restrained himself. Instead, he filled the bathtub and soaked in it for a long while. The water level had lowered itself visibly by the time he got out. When he studied himself in the bathroom mirror he seemed even larger. Could he have absorbed some of the water through his skin? At any rate, the inflammation seemed to have vanished, though his skin was still rough in those areas where it had been prominent.

He dressed himself in clothing he had left from an earlier time when he had been larger. Then he went out and rode the subways to the clothing store he had visited the previous day. There, he re-outfitted himself completely and rode back, feeling vaguely nauseous as the car jounced and swayed. He noted that his hands looked dry and rough. When he rubbed them, flakes of dead skin fell off like dandruff.

After he left the subway he walked on until he came to the Sarzannos' apartment building. The woman who opened the door was not Joe's mother, Rose, however.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Joe Sarzanno," he said.

"Nobody here by that name. Must be someone who moved out before we moved in."

"So you wouldn't know where they went?"

"No. Ask the manager. Maybe he knows."

She closed the door.

He tried the manager's apartment, but there was no answer. So he made his way home, feeling heavy and bloated. The second time that he yawned he was abruptly fearful. It seemed too soon to be going back to sleep. This transformation was more puzzling than usual.

He put a fresh pot of coffee on the stove and paced while he waited for it to percolate. While there was no certainty that he would awaken with a special power on each occasion, the one thing that had been constant was change. He thought back over all of the changes he had undergone since he had been infected. This was the only one where he had seemed neither joker nor ace, but normal. Still…

When the coffee was ready, he sat down with a cup and became aware that he had been scratching his right thigh, half-consciously. He rubbed his hands together and more dry skin flaked off. He considered his increased girth. He thought of all the little twinges and creaks, of the fatigue. It was obvious that he was *not* completely normal this time, but as to what his abnormality actually constituted, he was uncertain. Could Dr. Tachyon help him? he wondered. Or at least give him some idea as to what was going on?

He called the number that he had committed to memory. A woman with a cheerful voice told him that Tachyon was out but would be back that afternoon. She took Croyd's name, seemed to recognize it, and told him to come in at three.

He finished the pot of coffee; the itching had increased steadily all over his body as he sat drinking the final cup. He went upstairs and ran the water in the bathtub again. While the tub was filling he undressed and studied his body. All of his skin now had the dry, flaky appearance of his hands. Wherever he brushed himself a small flurry occurred.

He soaked for a long while. The warmth and the wetness felt good. After a time he leaned back and closed his eyes. Very good…

He sat up with a start. He had begun dozing. He had almost drifted off to sleep just then. He seized the washcloth and began rubbing himself vigorously, not only to remove all of the detritus. When he had finished he toweled himself briskly as the tub drained, then rushed to his room. He located the pills at the back of a clothing drawer and took two of them. Whatever games his body was playing, sleep was very much his enemy now.

He returned to the bathroom, cleaned the tub, dressed. It would feel good to stretch out on his bed for a time. To rest as Claudia had suggested. But he knew that he couldn't.

❖ ❖ ❖

Tachyon took a blood sample and fed it to his machine. On his first attempt, the needle had only gone in a short distance and stopped. The third needle, backed with considerable force, penetrated a subdermal layer of resistance and the blood was drawn.

While awaiting the machine's findings, Tachyon conducted a gross examination.

"Were your incisors that long when you awoke?" he asked, peering into Croyd's mouth.

"They looked normal when I brushed them," Croyd replied. "Have they grown?"

"Take a look."

Tachyon held up a small mirror. Croyd stared. The teeth were an inch long, and sharp looking.

"That's a new development," he stated. "I don't know when it happened."

Tachyon moved Croyd's left arm up behind his back in a gentle hammerlock, then pushed his fingers beneath the protruding scapula. Croyd screamed.

"That bad, is it?" Tachyon asked.

"My God!" Croyd said. "What is it? Is something broken back there?"

The doctor shook his head. He examined some of the skin flakes under a microscope. He studied Croyd's feet next.

"Were they this wide when you woke up?" he asked.

"No. What the hell is happening, Doc?"

"Let's wait another minute or so for my machine to finish with your blood. You've been here three or four times in the past…"

"Yes," Croyd said.

"Fortunately, you came in once right after you woke up. Another time, you were in about six hours after you awoke. On the former occasion you possessed a high level of a very peculiar hormone which I thought at the time might be associated with the change process itself. The other time—six hours after awakening—you still had traces of the hormone, but at a very low level. Those were the only two times it was evident."

"So?"

"The main test in which I am interested right now is a check for its presence in your blood. Ah! I believe we have something now."

A series of strange symbols flashed upon the screen of the small unit.

"Yes. Yes, indeed," he said, studying them. "You have a high level of the substance in your blood—higher even than it was right after awakening. Hm. You've been taking amphetamines again, too."

"I had to. I was starting to get sleepy, and I've got to make it to Saturday. Tell me in plain words what this damn hormone means."

"It means that the process of change is still going on within you. For some reason you awoke before it was completed. There seems to be a regular cycle of it, but this time it was interrupted."

"Why?"

Tachyon shrugged, a movement he seemed to have learned since the last time Croyd had seen him.

"Any of a whole constellation of possible biochemical events triggered by the change itself. I think you probably received some brain stimulation as a side effect of another change that was in progress at the time you were aroused. Whatever that particular change was, it is completed—but the rest of the process isn't. So your body is now trying to put you back to sleep until it finishes its business."

"In other words, I woke up too soon?"

"Yes."

"What should I do?"

"Stop taking the drugs immediately. Sleep. Let it run its course."

"I can't. I have to stay awake for two more days—a day and a half will do, actually."

"I suspect your body will fight this, and as I said once before, it seems to know what it's doing. I think you would be taking a chance to keep yourself awake much longer."

"What kind of chance? Do you mean it might kill me—or will it just make me uncomfortable?"

"Croyd, I simply do not know. Your condition is unique. Each change takes a different course. The only thing we can trust is whatever accommodation your body has made to the virus—whatever it is within you that brings you through each bout safely. If you try to stay awake by unnatural means now, this is the very thing that you will be fighting."

"I've put off sleep lots of times with amphetamines."

"Yes, but those times you were merely postponing the onset of the process. It doesn't normally begin until your brain chemistry registers a sleep state. But now it is already under way, and the presence of the hormone indicates its continuance. I don't know what will happen. You may turn an ace phase into a joker phase. You may lapse into a really lengthy coma. I simply have no way of telling."

Croyd reached for his shirt.

"I'll let you know how it all turns out," he said.

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Croyd did not feel like walking as much as he usually did. He rode the subway again. His nausea returned and this time brought with it a headache. And his shoulders were still hurting badly. He visited the drugstore near his subway stop and bought a bottle of aspirins.

He stopped by the apartment building where the Sarzannos had formerly resided, before he headed home. This time the manager was in. He was unable to help him, however, for Joe's family had left no forwarding address when they departed. Croyd glanced in the mirror beside the man's door as he left, and he was shocked at the puffiness of his eyes, at the deep circles beneath them. They were beginning to ache now, he noted.

He returned home. He had promised to take Claudia and Carl to a good restaurant for dinner, and he wanted to be in the best shape he could for the occasion. He returned to the bathroom and stripped again. He was huge, bloated-looking. He realized then that with all of his other symptoms, he had forgotten to tell Tachyon that he had not relieved himself at all since awakening. His body must be finding some use for everything that he ate or drank. He stepped on the scale, but it only went up to three hundred and he was over that. He took three aspirins and hoped that they would work soon. He scratched his arm and a long strip of flesh came away, painlessly and without bleeding. He scratched more gently in other areas and the flaking continued. He took a shower and brushed his fangs. He combed his hair and big patches of it came out. He stopped combing. For a moment he wanted to cry, but he was distracted by a yawning jag. He went to his room and took two more amphetamines. Then he recalled having heard somewhere that body mass had to be taken into account in calculating doses of medication. So he took another one, just to be safe.

❖ ❖ ❖

Croyd found a dark restaurant and he slipped the waiter something to put them in a booth toward the rear, out of sight of most of the other diners.

"Croyd, you're really looking—unwell," Claudia had said when she'd returned earlier.

"I know," he replied. "I went to see my doctor this afternoon."

"What did he say?"

"I'm going to need a lot of sleep, starting right after the wedding."

"Croyd, if you want to skip it, I'll understand. Your health comes first."

"I don't want to skip it. I'll be okay."

How could he say it to her when he did not fully understand it himself? Say that it was more than his favorite relative's wedding?—that the occasion represented the final rending of his home and that it was unlikely he would ever have another? Say that this was the end of a phase of his existence and the beginning of a big unknown?

Instead, he ate. His appetite was undiminished and the food was particularly good. Carl watched with the fascination of a voyeur, long after he had finished his own meal, as Croyd put away two more chateaubriands-for-two, pausing only to call for extra baskets of rolls.

When they finally rose Croyd's joints were creaking again.

He sat on his bed later that evening, aching. The aspirins weren't helping. He had removed his clothing because all of his garments were feeling tight again. Whenever he scratched himself now, his skin did more than flake. Big pieces of it came away, but they were dry and pale with no signs of blood. No wonder I look pasty-faced, he decided. At the bottom of one particularly large rent in his chest he saw something gray and hard. He could not figure what it was, but its presence frightened him.

Finally, despite the hour, he phoned Bentley. He had to talk to someone who knew his condition. And Bentley usually gave good advice.

After many rings Bentley answered, and Croyd told him his story.

"You know what I think, kid?" Bentley said at last. "You ought to do what the doctor said. Sleep it off."

"I can't. Not yet. I just need a little over a day. Then I'll be all right. I can keep awake that long, but I hurt so damn much and my appearance—"

"Okay, okay. Here's what we'll do. You come by about ten in the morning. I can't do anything for you now. But I'll talk to a man I know first thing, and we'll get you a really strong painkiller. And I want to have a look at you. Maybe there's some way of playing down your appearance a bit."

"Okay. Thanks, Bentley I appreciate it."

"It's all right. I understand. It was no fun being a dog either. G'night."

" 'Night."

* * *

Two hours later, Croyd was stricken with severe cramps followed by diarrhea; also, his bladder felt as if it were bursting. This continued through the night. When he weighed himself at three-thirty he was down to 276. By six o'clock he weighed 242 pounds. He gurgled constantly. Its only benefit, he reflected, was that it kept his mind off the itching and the aches in his shoulders and joints. Also, it was sufficient to keep him awake without additional amphetamines.

By eight o'clock he weighed 216 and he realized—when Carl called him—that he had finally lost his appetite. Strangely, his girth had not decreased at all. His general body structure was unaltered from the previous day, though he was pale now to the point of albinism—and this, combined with his prominent teeth, gave him the look of a fat vampire.

At nine o'clock he called Bentley because he was still gurgling and running to the john. He explained that he had the shits and couldn't come for the medicine. Bentley said that he'd bring it by himself as soon as the man dropped it off. Carl and Claudia had already left for the day. Croyd had avoided them this morning, claiming an upset stomach. He now weighed 198.

It was near eleven o'clock when Bentley came by. Croyd had lost another twenty pounds by then and had scratched off a large flap of skin from his lower abdomen. The area of exposed tissue beneath it was gray and scaly.

"My God!" Bentley said when he saw him.

"Yeah."

"You've got big bald patches."

"Right."

"I'll get you a hairpiece. Also, I'll talk to a lady I know. She's a beautician. We'll get you some kind of cream to rub in. Give you some normal color. I think you'd better wear dark glasses, too, when you go to the wedding. Tell 'em you got drops in your eyes. You're getting hunchbacked, too. When'd that happen?"

"I didn't even notice. I've been—occupied."

Bentley patted the lump between his shoulders and Croyd screamed.

"Sorry. Maybe you'd better take a pill right away."

"Yeah."

"You're going to need to wear a big overcoat, too. What size do you take?"

"I don't know—now."

"That's okay. I know someone's got a warehouse full. We'll send you a dozen."

"I've got to run, Bentley. I'm gurgling again."

"Yeah. Take your medicine and try to rest."

By two o'clock, Croyd weighed 155. The painkiller had worked fine, and he was without aches for the first time in a long while. Unfortunately, it had also made him sleepy and he had had to take amphetamines again. On the plus side, this combination gave him his first good feeling since the whole business had started, even though he knew it was fake.

When the load of coats was delivered at three-thirty he was down to 132 pounds and felt very light on his feet. Somewhere deep within him his blood seemed to be singing. He found a coat that fit him perfectly and took it back to his room, leaving the others on the sofa. The beautician—a tall, lacquered blonde who chewed gum—came by at four o'clock. She combed out most of his hair, shaved the rest, and fitted him with a hairpiece. She made up his face then, instructing him in the use of the cosmetics as she went along. She also advised him to keep his mouth closed as much as possible to hide his fangs. He was pleased with the results and gave her a hundred dollars. She observed then that there were other services she might perform for him, but he was gurgling again and had to bid her a good afternoon.

By six o'clock his guts began to ease up on him. He was down to 116 by then and still feeling very good. The itching had finally stopped also, though he had scratched more skin from his thorax, forearms, and thighs.

When Carl came in, he yelled upstairs, "What the hell are all these coats doing here?"

"It's a long story," Croyd answered. "You can have them if you want."

"Hey, they're cashmere!"

"Yeah."

"This one's my size."

"So take it."

"How you feeling?"

"Better, thanks."

That evening he felt his strength returning, and he took one of his long walks. He raised the front end of a parked car high into the air to test it. Yes, he seemed to be recovering now. With the hair and the makeup he looked like a garden-variety fat man, so long as he kept his mouth closed. If only he'd had a little more time he'd have sought a dentist to do something about the fangs. He did not eat anything that night or in the morning. He did feel a peculiar pressure on the sides of his head, but he took another pill and it did not turn to pain.

* * *

Before he and Carl left for Ridgewood, Croyd had indulged in another soak. More of his skin had come away, but that was all right. His clothes would cover his patchwork body. His face, at least, had remained intact. He applied his makeup carefully and adjusted the hairpiece. When he was fully dressed and had put on a pair of sunglasses, he thought that he looked fully presentable. And the overcoat did minimize the bulging of his back somewhat.

The morning was brisk and overcast. His intestinal problem seemed ended. He took another pill as a prophylactic, not knowing whether there was really any remaining pain to be masked. This necessitated another amphetamine. But that was all right. He felt fine, if a bit nervous.

As they were passing through the tunnel he found himself rubbing his hands. To his dismay, a large flap of skin came loose on the back of his left hand. But even that was all right. He had remembered to bring gloves.

He did not know whether it was the pressure in the tunnel, but his head was beginning to throb again. It was not a painful sensation, merely a vicinity of heavy pressure in his ears and temples. His upper back also throbbed, and there was a movement within it. He bit his lip and a piece of it came loose. He cursed.

"What's the matter?" his brother asked.

"Nothing."

At least it wasn't bleeding.

"If you're still sick, I can take you back. Hate to have you get ill at the wedding. Especially with a stodgy bunch like Sam's gang."

"I'll be okay."

He felt light. He felt the pressure at many points within his body. The sense of strength from the drug overlaid his genuine strength. Everything seemed to be flowing perfectly. He hummed a tune and tapped his fingers on his knee.

"…coats must be worth quite a bit," Carl was saying. "They're all new."

"Sell 'em somewhere and keep the money," he heard himself saying.

"They hot?"

"Probably."

"You in the rackets, Croyd?"

"No, but I know people."

"I'll keep quiet."

"Good."

"You sort of look the part, though, you know? With that black coat and the glasses…"

Croyd did not answer him. He was listening to his body, which was telling him that something was coming free in his back. He rubbed his shoulders against the back of the seat. This made him feel better.

When he was introduced to Sam's parents, William and Marcia Kendall—a rugged-looking gray-haired man gone slightly to fat, and a well-preserved blond woman—Croyd remembered to smile without opening his mouth and to make his few comments through barely moving lips. They seemed to study him carefully, and he felt certain they would have had more to say, save that there were others waiting to be greeted.

"I want to talk to you at the reception," were William's final words.

Croyd sighed as he moved away. He'd passed. He had no intention of attending the reception. He'd be in a taxi heading back to Manhattan as soon as the service ended, be sleeping in a matter of hours. Sam and Claudia would probably be in the Bahamas before he awoke.

He saw his cousin Michael from Newark and almost approached him. The hell with it. He'd have to explain his appearance then and it wasn't worth it. He entered the church and was shown to a pew in the front, to the right. Carl would be giving Claudia away. At least he had awakened too late to be impressed as an usher himself. There was that much to be said for his timing.

As he sat waiting for the ceremony to begin he regarded the altar decorations, the stained-glass windows at either hand, the arrangements of flowers. Other people entered and were seated. He realized that he was sweating. He glanced about. He was the only one wearing an overcoat. He wondered whether the others would think that strange. He wondered whether the perspiration was causing his makeup to run. He unbuttoned his coat, let it hang open.

The sweating continued, and his feet began to hurt. Finally, he leaned forward and loosened the shoelaces. As he did, he heard his shirt tear across his back. Something also seemed to have loosened even further in the vicinity of his shoulders. Another flap of skin, he supposed. When he straightened he felt a sharp pain. He could not lean all the way back in the pew. His hump seemed to have grown, and any pressure on it was painful. So he assumed a position partway forward, bowed slightly as if in prayer. The organist began playing. More people entered and were seated. An usher conducted an elderly couple past his row and gave him a strange look as he went by.

Soon everyone was seated, and Croyd continued to sweat. It ran down his sides and his legs, was absorbed by his clothing which became blotchy, then drenched. He decided that it might be a bit cooler if he slipped his arms out of the coat's sleeves and just let it hang about his shoulders. This was a mistake, for as he struggled to free his arms he heard his garments tear in several more places. His left shoe burst suddenly, and his toes protruded grayly from its sides. A number of people glanced his way as these sounds occurred. He was grateful that he was incapable of blushing.

He did not know whether it was the heat or something psychological that set off the itching again. Not that it mattered. It was a real itch, whatever had brought it on. He had painkillers and amphetamines in his pocket, but nothing for skin irritation. He clasped his hands tightly, not to pray but to keep from scratching—though he threw in a prayer too, since the circumstances seemed about as appropriate as they came. It didn't work.

Through perspiration-beaded lashes he saw the priest enter. He wondered why the man was staring at him so. It was as if he did not approve of non-Episcopalians sweating in his church. Croyd clenched his teeth. If only he still had the power to make himself invisible, he mused. He'd fade for a few minutes, scratch like mad, then phase back and sit quietly.

By dint of sheer will he was able to hold himself steady through Mendelssohn's "March." He was unable to focus on what the priest was saying after that, but he was now certain that he was not going to be able to remain seated through the entire ceremony. He wondered what would happen if he left right then. Would Claudia be embarrassed? On the other hand, if he stayed, he was certain that she would be. He must look ill enough to justify it. Still, would it become one of those incidents that people would talk about for years afterward? ("Her brother walked out…") Perhaps he could stay a little longer.

There was movement on his back. He felt his coat stirring. He heard female gasps from behind him. Now he was afraid to move, but—

The itching became overpowering. He unclasped his hands to scratch, but in a final act of resistance he seized hold of the back of the pew before him. To his horror, there came a loud cracking noise as the wood splintered within his grip.

There followed a long moment of silence.

The priest was staring at him. Claudia and Sam had both turned to stare at him, where he sat clutching a six-foot length of broken pew-back and knowing that he couldn't even smile or his fangs would show.

He dropped the wood and clasped himself with both arms. There were exclamations from behind as his coat slipped away. With his full strength he dug his fingers into his sides and scratched cross-body.

He heard his clothes tear and felt his skin rip all the way up to the top of his head. He saw the hairpiece fall away to his right. He threw down the clothing and the skin and scratched again, hard. He heard a scream from the rear and he knew that he would never forget the look on Claudia's face as she began to cry. But he could no longer stop. Not until his great batlike wings were unfurled, the high, pointed vanes of his ears freed, and the last remnants of clothing and flesh removed from his dark, scaled frame.

The priest began speaking again, something that sounded like an exorcism. There came shrieks and the sounds of rapid footfalls. He knew that he couldn't exit through the door where everyone else was headed, so he leapt into the air, circled several times to get a feeling of his new limbs, then covered his eyes with his left forearm and crashed out through the stained-glass window to his right.

As he beat his way back toward Manhattan he felt that it would be a long time before he saw the in-laws again. He hoped that Carl wouldn't be getting married for a while. He wondered then whether he'd ever meet the right girl himself…

Catching an updraft he soared, the breezes sobbing about him. The church looked like a disturbed anthill when he glanced back. He flew on.

Notes

This story introduces Croyd Crenson, the ninth-grader who becomes infected with the Wild Cards virus in September 1946. He can spend days or weeks without sleep, followed by longer intervals of sleep during which he gains a new appearance and set of powers. Zelazny contributed the character and story to Wild Cards, George R. R. Martin's shared world series.

Amphetamines stimulate the central nervous system, causing elevated blood pressure, heart rate, and other metabolic functions. Highly addictive, the drugs can cause paranoia, which Croyd experienced when he was taking them. **Galway Bay** is an Irish ballad from 1850. Taking its name from a region of Tuscany, **Chianti** is Italy's most famous red wine. Felix **Mendelssohn's** "Wedding **March**" is one of the most common pieces played at a wedding.

NIGHT OF FISTING

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.
Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky.*

Fragments of dimness cling in corners;
center is a bonfire of flesh and time
where rushing orients of limb
ride hide hammers, glistening
behind thrown turmoil;

heavy hacks pierce frenzied prayer,
removed in gloom and stench.

The stippled Gipsy bows and wipes his nose,
then strong, straight for gut goes,
as Minneapolis Bob cracks
like a brand burnt
through, circles with a poker for the blaze,
and dabs in dimmed excitements down.

The sultanic sentinel makes pixilated crucifix
above the worming ember; corner moth-dances
solicit rages of acclaim.

We lean to warm our hands—fan, stoke, draw
up fires to height of man—
when, from stretched throats,
the croak of chaos
rides in smoky quick wind
that winds the incandescence,
switched, bell-with, off.

The fallen eye of omniscience
shatters with slammed seats;
and we speak, as our hunger
for fearful time
fades to phosphorescence
within the enormous dark.

Notes

Apparently a night at the arena watching boxing. **Sultanic sentinel** (ruling guard/observer) is the referee with arms spread (**makes pixilated crucifix)** over the fighter who is down (**worming ember**) while the winner dances in the corner (**corner moth-dances**) and the fans roar approval (**rages of acclaim**).

THE GAME'S THIRTEENTH STRIKE

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.
Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky.*

Each nettle shreds a silence,
needling in furrows
of forehead seeming shine
to settling pins
in passioned gallery.

Notes

The title and poem refer to bowling, not baseball. Since a perfect game has twelve strikes, the **thirteenth strike** suggests a bowling competition ending in perfect games that requires an extra frame to break the tie.

ASHES TO ASHES

Wild Cards 2: Aces High, ed. George R. R. Martin, Bantam 1987.
§ *Wild Cards*

The radio spat static. Croyd Crenson reached out, switched it off, and threw it across the room toward the wastebasket beside the dresser. He took it as a good omen that it went in.

He stretched then, flipped back the covers, and regarded his pale nude body. Everything seemed to be in place and normally proportioned. He willed himself to levitate and nothing happened, so he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. He ran his hand through his hair, pleased to find that he possessed hair. Waking up was always an adventure.

He tried to make himself invisible, to melt the wastebasket with a thought and to cause sparks to arc between his fingertips. None of these things occurred.

He rose and made his way to the bathroom. As he drank glass after glass of water he studied himself in the mirror. Light hair and eyes this time, regular features; fairly good-looking, actually. He judged himself to be a little over six feet in height. Well-muscled, too. There ought to be something in the closet that would fit. He'd been about this height and build before.

It was a gray day beyond the window with patches of slushy-looking snow lining the sidewalk across the street. Water trickled in the gutter. Croyd halted on his way to the closet to withdraw a heavy steel rod from a crate beneath his writing table. Almost casually, he bent the rod in half and then twisted it. The strength had carried over yet again, he reflected, as the metal pretzel joined the radio in the wastebasket. He located a shirt and trousers that fit him well, and a tweed jacket only slightly tight in the shoulders. He turned his attention then to his large collection of shoes, and after a time he came up with a comfortable pair.

It was a little after eight o'clock according to his Rolex, and this being winter and daylight it meant morning. His stomach rumbled. Time for breakfast and orientation. He checked his cash cache and withdrew a couple of hundred dollars. Getting low, he mused. Have to visit the bank later. Or maybe rob one. The stocks were taking a beating, too, the last time around. Later…

He equipped himself with a handkerchief, a comb, his keys, and a small plastic bottle of pills. He did not like to carry identification of any sort. No need for an overcoat. Temperature extremes seldom bothered him.

He locked the door behind him, negotiated the hall and descended the stairs. He turned left when he reached the street, facing into a sharp wind, and he began walking down the Bowery. Leaving a dollar in the outstretched hand of a tall, cadaverous-looking joker with a nose like an icicle—who stood as still as a totem pole in the doorway of a closed mask shop—Croyd asked the man what month it was.

"December," the figure said without moving its lips. "Merry Christmas."

"Yeah," Croyd said.

He tried a few more simple tests as he headed for his first stop, but he could not break the empty whisky bottles in the gutter with a thought, nor set fire to any of the piles of trash. He attempted to utter ultrasounds but only produced squeaks.

He hiked down to the newsstand at Hester Street where short, fat Jube Benson sat reading one of his own papers. Benson had on a yellow and orange Hawaiian shirt beneath a light-blue summer suit; bristles of red hair protruded from beneath his porkpie hat. The temperature seemed to bother him no more than it did Croyd. He raised his dark, blubbery, pocked face and displayed a pair of short, curving tusks as Croyd stopped before the stand.

"Paper?" he asked.

"One of each," Croyd said, "as usual."

Jube's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied the man before him. Then, "Croyd?" he asked.

Croyd nodded.

"It's me, Walrus. How're they hanging?"

"Can't complain, fella. Got yourself a pretty one this time."

"Still test-driving it," Croyd said, gathering a stack of papers.

Jube showed more tusk.

"What's the most dangerous job in Jokertown?" he asked.

"I give up."

"Riding shotgun on the garbage truck," he said. "Hear what happened to the gal who won the Miss Jokertown contest?"

"What?"

"Lost her title when they learned she'd posed nude for *Poultry Breeder's Gazette.*"

"That's sick, Jube," said Croyd, quirking a smile.

"I know. We got hit by a hurricane while you were asleep. Know what it did?"

"What?"

"Four million dollars' worth of civic improvement."

"All right, already!" Croyd said. "What do I owe you?"

Jube put down his paper, rose, and waddled to the side of the kiosk.

"Nothin'," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"I've got to eat, Jube. When I wake up I need a lot of food in a hurry. I'll come back later, all right?"

"Is it okay if I join you?"

"Sure. But you'll lose business."

Jube began closing the stand.

"That's okay," he said. "This *is* business."

Croyd waited for him to secure the stand, and they walked two blocks to Hairy's Kitchen.

"Let's take that booth in the back," Jube said.

"Fine. No business till after my first round of food, though, okay? I can't concentrate with low blood sugar, funny hormones and lots of transaminases. Let me get something else inside first."

"I understand. Take your time."

When the waiter came by, Jube said that he had already eaten and ordered only a cup of coffee which he never touched. Croyd started with a double order of steak and eggs and a pitcher of orange juice.

Ten minutes later when the pancakes arrived, Jube cleared his throat.

"Yeah," Croyd said. "That's better. So what's bothering you, Jube?"

"Hard to begin," said the other.

"Start anywhere. Life is brighter for me now."

"It isn't always healthy to get too curious about other people's business around here…"

"True," Croyd agreed.

"On the other hand, people love to gossip, to speculate."

Croyd nodded, kept eating.

"It's no secret about the way you sleep, and that's got to keep you from holding a regular job. Now, you seem more of an ace than a joker, overall. I mean, usually you look normal but you've got some special talent."

"I haven't got a handle on it yet, this time around."

"Whatever. You dress well, you pay your bills, you like to eat at Aces High, and that ain't a Timex you're wearing. You've got to *do* something to stay on top—unless you inherited a bundle."

Croyd smiled.

"I'm afraid to look at the *Wall Street Journal*," he said, touching the stack of papers at his side. "I may have to *do* something I haven't done in a while if it says what I think it's going to say."

"May I assume then that when you work your employment is sometimes somewhat less than legal?"

Croyd raised his head, and when their eyes met Jube flinched. It was the first time Croyd realized that the man was nervous. He laughed.

"Hell, Jube," he said. "I've known you long enough to know you're no cop. You want something done, is that it? If it involves stealing something, I'm good at that. I learned from an expert. If someone's being blackmailed I'll be glad to get the evidence back and scare the living shit out of the person doing it. If you want something removed, destroyed, transported, I'm your man. On the other hand, if you want somebody killed I don't like to do that. But I could give you the names of a couple of people it wouldn't bother."

Jube shook his head.

"I don't want anybody killed, Croyd. I do want something stolen, though."

"Before you go into any details, I'd better tell you that I come high."

Jube showed his tusks.

"The—uh—interests I represent are prepared to make it worth your while."

Croyd finished the pancakes, drank coffee, and ate a Danish while he waited for the waffles.

"It's a body, Croyd," Jube said at last.

"What?"

"A corpse."

"I don't understand."

"There was a guy who died over the weekend. Body was found in a dumpster. No ID. It's a John Doe. Over at the morgue."

"Jeez, Jube! A body? I never stole a body before. What good is it to anybody?"

Jube shrugged.

"They're willing to pay real well for it—and for whatever possessions the guy had with him. That's all they wanted said."

"I guess it's their business what they want it for. But what kind of money are they talking?"

"It's worth fifty grand to them."

"Fifty grand? For a stiff?" Croyd stopped eating and stared. "You've got to be kidding."

"Nope. I can give you ten now and forty when you deliver."

"And if I can't pull it off?"

"You get to keep the ten, for trying. You interested?"

Croyd took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Yeah," he said then. "I'm interested. But I don't even know where the morgue is."

"It's in the medical examiner's office at Five-Twenty First Avenue."

"Okay. Say I go over there and—"

Hairy came by and laid a plate of sausages and hash browns before Croyd. He refilled his coffee cup and placed several bills and some coins on the table.

"Your change, sir."

Croyd looked at the money.

"What do you mean?" he said. "I didn't pay you yet."

"You gave me a fifty."

"No, I didn't. I'm not finished."

It looked as if Hairy smiled, deep within the dark dense pelt that covered him entirely.

"I wouldn't stay in business long if I gave away money," he said. "I know when I'm making change."

Croyd shrugged and nodded.

"I guess so."

Croyd furrowed his brows when Hairy had left, and he shook his head.

"I didn't pay him, Jube," he said.

"I don't remember seeing you pay him either. But he said a fifty… That's hard to forget."

"Peculiar, too. Because I was thinking of breaking a fifty here when I was done."

"Oh? Do you recall when the thought passed through your mind?"

"Yeah. When he brought the waffles."

"Did you actually have a mental image of taking out a fifty and handing it to him?"

"Yes."

"Interesting…"

"What do you mean?"

"I think that maybe your power this time—some kind of telepathic hypnosis. You'll just have to play with it a bit to get the hang of it, to find its limits."

Croyd nodded slowly

"Please don't try it on me, though, I'm screwed up enough as it is today."

"Why? You got some stake in this corpse business?"

"The less you know the better, Croyd. Believe me."

"Okay, I can see that. I don't really care, anyway. Not for what they're paying," he said. "So I take this job. Say everything goes smoothly and I've got this body. What do I do with it?"

Jube withdrew a pen and a small notebook from an inside pocket. He wrote for a moment, tore off a sheet, and passed it to Croyd. Then he dug in his side pocket, produced a key, and put it next to Croyd's plate.

"That address is about five blocks from here," he said. "Rented room, ground floor. The key fits the lock. You take it there, lock it in, and come tell me at the stand."

Croyd began eating again. After a time, he said, "Okay."

"Good."

"But they've probably got more than one John Doe in there this time of year. Winos who freeze to death—you know. How do I know which one is the right one?"

"I was getting to that. This guy's a joker, see? A little fellow. About five feet tall, maybe. Looks kind of like a big bug—legs that fold up like a grasshopper's, an exoskeleton with some fur on it, four fingers on his hands with three joints each, eyes on the sides of his head, vestigial wings on back…"

"I get the picture. Sounds hard to confuse with the standard model."

"Yes. Shouldn't weigh much either."

Croyd nodded. Someone in the front of the restaurant said, "… pterodactyl!" and Croyd turned his head in time to see the winged shape flit by the window.

"That kid again," Jube said.

"Yeah. Wonder who he's pestering this time?"

"You know him?"

"Uh-huh. He shows up every now and then. Kind of an aces fan. At least he doesn't know what I look like this time. Anyway… How soon do they need this body?"

"The sooner the better."

"Anything you can tell me about the setup at the morgue?"

Jube nodded slowly.

"Yes. It's a six-story building. Labs and offices and such, upstairs. Reception and viewing area on the ground floor. They keep the bodies in the basement. The autopsy rooms are down there, too. They have a hundred and twenty-eight storage compartments, with a walk-in refrigerator with shelves for kids' bodies. When somebody has to view a body for ID purposes, they put it on a special elevator which lifts it to a glass-enclosed chamber in a waiting room on the first floor."

"So you've been there?"

"No, I read Milton Helpern's memoirs."

"You've got what I'd call a real liberal education," Croyd said. "I should probably read more myself."

"You can buy a lot of books for fifty grand."

Croyd smiled.

"So, we've got a deal?"

"Let me think about it a little longer—over breakfast—while I figure out just how my talent works. I'll come by your stand when I'm done. When would I pick up the ten grand?"

"I can get it by this afternoon."

"Okay. I'll see you in a hour or so."

Jube nodded, raised his massive bulk, slid out of the booth.

"Watch your cholesterol," he said.

❖ ❖ ❖

Blue cracks had appeared in the sky's gray shell, and sunlight found its way through to the street. The sound of trickling water came steadily now from somewhere to the rear of the newsstand. Jube would normally have thought it a pleasant background to the traffic noises and other sounds of the city, save that a small moral dilemma had drifted in on leathery wings and destroyed the morning. He did not realize he had made a decision in the matter until he looked up and saw Croyd looking at him, smiling.

"No problem," said Croyd. "It'll be a piece of cake."

Jube sighed.

"There's something I've got to tell you first," he said.

"Problems?"

"Nothing that bears directly on the terms of the job," Jube explained. "But you may have a problem you didn't know you had."

"Like what?" Croyd said, frowning.

"That pterodactyl we saw earlier…?"

"Yeah?"

"Kid Dinosaur was headed here. I found him waiting when I got back. He was looking for you."

"I hope you didn't tell him where to find me."

"No, I wouldn't do that. But you know how he keeps tabs on aces and high-powered jokers…?"

"Yeah. Why couldn't he be into baseball players or war criminals?"

"He saw one he wanted you to know about. He said that Devil John Darlingfoot got out of the hospital a month or so ago and dropped out of sight. But he's back now. He'd seen him near the Cloisters earlier. Says he's heading for Midtown."

"Well, well. So what?"

"So he thinks he's looking for you. Wants a rematch. The Kid thinks he's still mad over what you did to him the day the two of you trashed Rockefeller Plaza."

"So let him keep looking. I'm not a short, heavyset, dark-haired guy anymore. I'll go get the stiff now—before someone buys him a short bier."

"Don't you want the money?"

"You already gave it to me."

"When?"

"What's your first memory of my coming back here?"

"I looked up about a minute ago and saw you standing there smiling. You said there was no problem. You called it 'a piece of cake.' "

"Good. Then, it's working."

"You'd better explain."

"That's the place where I wanted you to start remembering. I'd been here for about a minute before that, and I talked you into giving me the money and forgetting about it."

Croyd withdrew an envelope from an inner pocket, opened it, and displayed cash.

"Good Lord, Croyd! What else did you do during that minute?"

"Your virtue's intact, if that's what you mean."

"You didn't ask me any questions—about…?"

Croyd shook his head.

"I told you I didn't care who wants the body or why. I really don't like to burden myself with other people's concerns. I've enough problems of my own."

Jube sighed.

"Okay. Go do it, boy."

Croyd winked.

"Not to worry, Walrus. Consider it done."

* * *

Croyd walked until he came to a supermarket, went in and purchased a small package of large plastic trash bags. He folded one and fitted it into his inside jacket pocket. He left the rest in a waste bin. Then he walked to the next major intersection and hailed a cab.

He rehearsed his strategy as he rode across town. He would enter the place and use his latest power to persuade the receptionist that he was expected, that he was a pathologist from Bellevue who had been called over by a friend on the staff to consult on a forensic peculiarity. He toyed for a moment with the names Malone and Welby, settled upon Anderson. He would then cause the receptionist to summon someone with the authority to take him downstairs and find him his John Doe. He would place that person under control, get the body and its belongings, transfer it to a baggy, and walk out, causing everyone he passed to forget he had been by. Certainly a lot simpler than more strenuous tactics he had had to employ over the years. He smiled at the classic simplicity of it—no violence, no memory…

When he arrived at the aluminum-paneled building of blue and white glazed brick, he told the cab driver to go on by and drop him at the next corner. There were two police cars parked in front and a shattered door lay before the place. The presence of police at a morgue did not seem that untoward an occurrence, but the broken door aroused his sense of caution. He handed the driver a fifty and told him to wait. He strolled past the place once and looked inside. Several of the police were visible, apparently talking with employees.

This did not seem an ideal time to proceed with his plan. On the other hand, he could not afford to go away without finding out what had happened. So he turned when he reached the corner, and headed back. He entered without hesitation, looking about quickly.

A man in civvies who was standing with the police turned suddenly in his direction and stared. Croyd did not like that stare at all. It pulled the floor out from under his stomach and made his hands tingle.

He reached out immediately with his new power, heading directly toward the man, forcing a smile as he moved.

It's okay. You want to talk to me and do exactly as I say. Wave your hand now, say, "Hi, Jim!" in a loud voice and walk over to the side there with me.

"Hi, Jim!" the man said, moving to join Croyd.

No! Judas thought. *Too damned fast. Nailed me as soon as I spotted him… We can use this guy…*

"Plainclothes?" Croyd asked him.

"Yes," the man felt himself wanting to answer.

"What's your name?"

"Matthias."

"What happened here?"

"A body was stolen."

"Which one?"

"A John Doe."

"Can you describe it?"

"Looked like a big bug—grasshopper legs."

"Shit!" Croyd said. "What about his possessions?"

"There weren't any possessions."

Several of the uniformed officers were glancing in their direction now. Croyd gave his next order mentally. Matthias turned toward the uniforms.

"Just a minute, guys," he called. "Business."

Damn! he thought. *This one will come in handy. You can't hold me like this forever, fella…*

"How'd it happen?" Croyd asked.

"A guy came in here a little while ago, went downstairs, forced an attendant to show him the compartment, took the body out, and left with it."

"Nobody tried to stop him?"

"Sure they did. Four of them are on their way to the hospital as a result. The guy was an ace."

"Which one?"

"The one who wrecked Rockefeller Plaza last fall."

"Darlingfoot?"

"Yeah, that's the one." *Don't…Don't ask any more—whether I'm involved, whether I hired him, whether I'm running a cover-up now…*

"Which way did he go with it?"

"Northwest."

"On foot?"

"That's what the witnesses said—big, twenty-foot leaps." *As soon as you let me go, sucker, I'm calling in the nukes on you.*

"Hey, why'd you turn and look at me the way you did when I came in?"

Damn!

"I felt that an ace had just walked through the door."

"How'd you know?"

"I'm an ace myself. That's my power—spotting other aces."

"Useful talent for a cop, I guess. Well, listen close. You are now going to forget you ever met me, and you won't notice me leaving. You're just going to walk on over to that fountain and get a drink, then walk back and join your buddies. If anyone asks who you were talking to, you'll say it was your bookie and forget about it. You do that now. Forget!"

Croyd turned and walked away. Judas realized he was thirsty.

Outside, Croyd walked to his cab, climbed in, slammed the door and said, "Northwest."

"What do you mean?" the driver asked him.

"Just head uptown and I'll tell you what to do as we go along."

"You're the boss."

The car jerked into motion.

Over the next mile Croyd had the driver jog westward, as he searched for signs of the other's passage. It seemed unlikely that Devil John would be using public transportation when carrying a corpse. On the other hand, it was possible he'd had an accomplice waiting with a vehicle. Still, knowing the man's chutzpah, it did not seem out of the question for him to be hoofing it with the body. He knew that there was very little anyone could do to stop him if he did not wish to be stopped. Croyd sighed as he scanned the way ahead. Why were simple things never easy?

Later, as they were nearing Morningside Heights, the driver muttered, "…one of them damn jokers!"

Croyd followed the man's gesture to where the form of a pterodactyl was in sight for several moments before passing behind a building.

"Follow it!" Croyd said.

"The leather bird?"

"Yes!"

"I'm not sure where it is now."

"Find it!"

Croyd waved another bill at the man, and the tires screeched and a horn blared as the cab took a turn. Croyd's gaze swept the skyline, but the Kid was still out of sight. He halted the cab moments later to question an oncoming jogger. The man popped an earplug, listened a moment, then pointed to the east and took off again.

Several minutes later, he caught sight of the angular birdform, to the north, moving in wide circles. This time they were able to keep track of it for a longer while, and to gain on it.

When they came abreast of the area the pterodactyl circled, Croyd called to the driver to slow. There was still nothing unusual in sight on the ground, but the saurian's sweeping path covered an area of several blocks. If he were indeed tracking Devil John, the man could well be nearby.

"What are we looking for?" the driver asked him.

"A big, red-bearded, curly-haired man with two very different legs," Croyd answered. "The right one is heavy, hairy, and ends in a hoof. The other's normal."

"I heard something about that guy. He's dangerous…"

"Yeah, I know."

"What are you planning on doing if you find him?"

"I was hoping for a meaningful dialogue," Croyd said.

"I ain't gettin' too close to your dialogue. If we spot him, I'm taking off."

"I'll make it worth you while to wait."

"No thanks," the driver said. "You want out, I'll drop you and run. That's it."

"Well… The pterodactyl is moving north. Let's try to get ahead of it, and when we do you cut east on the first street where we can."

The driver accelerated again, drifting to the right while Croyd tried to guess the center of the Kid's circle.

"The next street," Croyd said finally. "Turn there and see what happens."

They took the corner slowly and cruised the entire block without Croyd's spotting his quarry or even viewing his airborne telltale again. At the next intersection, however, the winged form passed once more and this time he had sight of the one he sought.

Devil John was on the opposite side of the street, halfway down the block. He bore a shrouded parcel in his arms. His shoulders were massive; his white teeth flashed as a woman with a shopping cart rushed to get out of his way. He wore Levi's—the right leg torn off high on the thigh—and a pink sweatshirt suggesting he had visited Disney World. A passing motorist sideswiped a parked car as John took a normal step with his left foot, bent his right leg at an odd angle, and sprang twenty feet farther ahead to an open area near the curb. He turned then with a normal step and sprang again, clearing a slow-moving red Honda and landing in a patch of grass on the street's central island. Two large dogs that had been following him rushed to the curb, barking loudly, but halted there and regarded oncoming traffic.

"Stop!" Croyd called to the driver, and he opened the door and stepped to the curb before the vehicle came to a complete halt.

He cupped his hands to his mouth then and shouted, "Darlingfoot! Hold on!"

The man only glanced in his direction, already bending his leg to spring again.

"It's me—Croyd Crenson!" he called out. "I want to talk to you!"

The satyr-like figure halted in mid-crouch. The shadow of a pterodactyl swept by. The two dogs continued to bark, and a tiny white poodle rounded a corner and rushed to join them. An auto horn blared at two halted pedestrians in a crosswalk. Devil John turned and stared. Then he shook his head.

"You're not Crenson!" he shouted.

Croyd strode forward.

"The hell I'm not!" he answered, and he darted into the street and crossed to the island.

Devil John's eyes were narrowed beneath his shaggy brows as he studied Croyd's advancing figure. He raked his lower lip slowly with his upper teeth, then shook his head more slowly.

"Naw," he said. "Croyd was darker and a lot shorter. What are you trying to pull, anyway?"

Croyd shrugged.

"My appearance changes pretty regularly," he said. "But I'm the same guy who whipped your ass last fall."

Darlingfoot laughed.

"Get lost, fella," he said. "I don't have time for groupies—"

They both clenched their teeth as a car drew up beside them and its horn blasted. A man in a gray business suit stuck his head out of the window.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

Croyd growled, stepped into the street, and removed the rear bumper, which he then placed in the vehicle's back seat through a window that had been closed up until then.

"Auto inspection," he said. "You pass. Congratulations."

"Croyd!" Darlingfoot exclaimed as the car sped off. "It is you!"

He tossed his shrouded burden to the ground and raised his fists.

"I've been waiting all winter for this…"

"Then, wait a minute longer," Croyd said. "I've got to ask you something."

"What?"

"That body… Why'd you take it?"

The big man laughed.

"For money, of course. What else?"

"Mind telling me what they're paying you for it?"

"Five grand. Why?"

"Cheap bastards," Croyd said. "They say what they want it for?"

"No, and I didn't ask because I don't care. A buck's a buck."

"Yeah," Croyd said. "Who are they, anyhow?"

"Why? What's it to you?"

"Well, I think you're getting screwed on the deal. I think it's worth more."

"How much?"

"Who are they?"

"Some Masons, I think. What's it worth?"

"Masons? Like secret handshakes and all that? I thought they just existed to give each other expensive funerals. What could they want with a dead joker?"

Darlingfoot shook his head.

"They're a weird bunch," he said. "For all I know, they want to eat it. Now, what were you saying about money?"

"I think I could get more for it," Croyd said. "What say I see their five and raise it one? I'll give you six big ones for it."

"I don't know, Croyd… I don't like to screw people I work for. Word will get around I'm undependable."

"Well, maybe I could go seven—"

They both turned suddenly at a series of savage growls and snappings. The dogs—joined by two additional strays—had crossed over during their conversation and dragged the small, insectlike body from its shroud. It had broken in several places, and the Great Dane held most of an arm in his teeth as he backed away, snarling, from the German shepherd. Two others had torn one of the grasshopperlike legs loose and were fighting over it. The poodle was already halfway across the street, a four-digited hand in its mouth. Croyd became aware of a particularly foul odor other than New York air.

"Shit!" Devil John exclaimed, leaping forward, his hoof shattering a square of concrete paving near to the remains. He grabbed for the Great Dane and it turned and raced away. The terrier let go of the leg. The brown mongrel didn't. It tore across the street in the other direction, dragging the appendage. "I'll get the arm! You get the leg!" Devil John cried, bounding after the Great Dane.

"What about the hand?" Croyd yelled, kicking at another dog newly arrived on the scene.

Darlingfoot's reply was predictable, curt, and represented an anatomical unlikelihood of a high order. Croyd took off after the brown dog.

As Croyd approached the corner where he had seen it turn, he heard a series of sharp yelps. Coming onto the side street he saw the dog lying on its back snapping at the pterodactyl which pinned it to the pavement. The battered limb lay nearby Croyd sprinted forward.

"Thanks, Kid. I owe you one," he said as he reached for the leg, hesitated, took out his handkerchief, wrapped it about his hand, picked up the limb, and held it downwind.

The pterodactyl shape flowed, to be replaced by that of a nude boy—perhaps thirteen years of age—with light eyes and unruly brown hair, a small birthmark on his forehead.

"Got it for you, Croyd," he announced. "Sure stinks, though."

"Yeah, Kid," Croyd said. "Excuse me. Now I've got to go put it back together."

He turned and hurried in the direction from which he had come. Behind him he heard rapid footfalls.

"What you want it for?" the boy asked.

"It's a long, complicated, boring story, and it's better you don't know," he answered.

"Aw, c'mon. You can tell me."

"No time. I'm in a hurry."

"You going to fight Devil John again?"

"I don't plan on it. I think we can come to a meeting of minds without resorting to violence."

"But if you do fight, what's your power this time?"

Croyd reached the corner, cut across to the island. Ahead he saw where another dog now worried the remains. Devil John was nowhere in sight.

"Damn it!" he yelled. "Get away from there!"

The dog paid him no heed, but stripped a furry layer from the chitinous carapace. Croyd noticed that the torn tissue was dripping some colorless liquid. The remains looked moist now, and Croyd realized that fluids were oozing from the breathing holes in the thorax.

"Get away from there!" he repeated.

The dog growled at him. Suddenly, though, the growl turned to a whimper and the animal's tail vanished between its legs. A meter-high tyrannosaurus hopped past Croyd, hissing fiercely. The dog turned and fled. A moment later, the Kid stood in its place.

"It's getting away with that piece," the boy said.

Croyd repeated Darlingfoot's comment on the hand as he tossed the leg down beside the dismembered body. He withdrew the folded trash bag from the inner pocket of his jacket and shook it out.

"You want to help, Kid, you hold the bag while I toss in what's left."

"Okay. It sure is gross."

"It's a dirty job," Croyd agreed.

"Then, why you doing it?"

"It's what growing up is all about, Kid."

"How do you mean?"

"You spend more and more of your time cleaning up after mistakes."

A rapid thumping noise approached, a shadow passed overhead, and Devil John crashed to the earth beside them.

"Damn dog got away," he announced. "You get the leg?"

"Yeah," Croyd answered. "It's already in the bag."

"Good idea—a plastic bag. Who's the naked kid?"

"You don't know Kid Dinosaur?" Croyd answered. "I thought he knew everybody. He's the pterodactyl was following you."

"Why?"

"I like to be where the action is," the Kid said.

"Hey, how come you're not in school?" Croyd asked.

"School sucks."

"Now, wait a minute. I had to quit school in ninth grade and I never got to go back. I always regretted it."

"Why? You're doing okay."

"There's all that stuff I missed. I wish I hadn't."

"Like what?"

"Well…Algebra. I never learned algebra."

"What the fuck good's algebra?"

"I don't know and I never will, because I didn't learn it. I sometimes look at people on the street and say, 'Gee, I'll bet they all know algebra,' and it makes me feel kind of inferior."

"Well, I don't know algebra and it doesn't make feel a damn bit inferior."

"Give it time," Croyd said.

The Kid suddenly became aware that Croyd was looking at him strangely.

"You're going back to school right now," Croyd told him, "and you're going to study your ass off for the rest of the day, and you're going to do your homework tonight, and you're going to like it."

"I make better time if I fly," the Kid said, and he transformed into a pterodactyl, hopped several times, and glided away

"Pick up some clothes on the way!" Croyd shouted after him.

"Just what the hell is going on here?"

Croyd turned and beheld a uniformed officer who had just crossed to their island.

"Go fuck yourself!" he snarled.

The man began unbuckling his belt.

"Stop! Cancel that," Croyd said. "Buckle up. Forget you saw us and go walk up another street."

Devil John stared as the man obeyed.

"Croyd, how are you doing those things?" he asked.

"That's my power, this time around."

"Then, you could just make me give you the body, couldn't you?"

Croyd shook the bag down and fastened it. When he finished gagging, he nodded.

"Yeah. And I'll get it one way or another, too. But I don't feel like cheating a fellow working stiff today. My offer's still good."

"Seven grand?"

"Six."

"You said seven."

"Yeah, but it's not all here now."

"That's your fault, not mine. You stopped me."

"But you put the thing down where the dogs could get it."

"Yes, but how was I supposed to—Hey, that's a bar and grill on the corner."

"You're right."

"Care to discuss this over lunch and a couple of brews?"

"Now, that you mention it, I've a bit of an appetite," Croyd said.

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They took the table by the window and set the bag on the empty chair. Croyd visited the men's room and washed his hands several times while Devil John procured a pair of beers. When he returned he ordered a half-dozen sandwiches. Darlingfoot did the same.

"Who're *you* working for?" he asked.

"I don't know," Croyd answered. "I'm doing it through a third party."

"Complicated. I wonder what they all want the thing for?"

Croyd shook his head.

"Beats me. I hope there's enough of him left to collect on."

"That's one of the reasons I'm willing to deal. I think my guys wanted him in better shape than this. They might try to welsh on me. Better a bird in the hand, you know? I don't trust them all that much. Bunch of kooks."

"Say, did he have any possessions?"

"Nope. No belongings at all."

The sandwiches arrived and they began eating. After a while, Darlingfoot glanced several times at the bag, then remarked, "You know, that thing looks bigger."

Croyd studied it a moment.

"It's just settling and shifting," he said.

They finished, then ordered two more beers.

"No, damn it! It *is* bigger!" Darlingfoot insisted.

Croyd looked again. It seemed to swell even as he watched.

"You're right," he acknowledged. "It must be gases from the—uh—decomposition."

He extended a finger as if to poke it, thought better of it and lowered his hand.

"So what do you say? Seven grand?"

"I think six is fair—the shape he's in."

"But they knew what they were asking for. You've got to expect this sort of thing with stiffs."

"A certain amount, yes. But you've got to admit you bounced him around a hell of a lot, too."

"That's true, but a regular one could take it better. How was I to know this guy was a special case?"

"By looking at him. He was little and fragile."

"He felt pretty sturdy when I snatched him. What say we split the difference? Sixty-five hundred?"

"I don't know…"

Other diners began glancing in their direction as the bag continued to swell. They finished their beers.

"Another round?"

"Why not?"

"Waiter!"

Their waiter, who had been clearing a recently vacated table, ambled over, a stack of dishes and utensils in his hands.

"What can I get—" he began, when the edge of a steak knife, protruding from the pile of crockery, brushed against the swollen bag. "My God!" he finished, as a *whooshing* sound, accompanied by an odor that might have been compounded of sewer gas and slaughterhouse effluvia filled the immediate vicinity and spread like an escaped experiment in chemical warfare throughout the room.

"Excuse me," the waiter said, and he turned and hurried off.

There followed a series of gasps from other diners, moments later.

"Use your power, Croyd!" Devil John whispered. "Hurry!"

"I don't know if I can do a whole roomful…"

"Try!"

Croyd concentrated on the others:

There was a small accident. Nothing important. Now you will forget it. You smell nothing unusual. Return to your meals and do not look in this direction again. You will not notice anything that we do. There is nothing to be seen here. Or smelled.

The other patrons turned away, resumed eating, talking.

"You did it," Devil John remarked in a peculiar voice.

Croyd looked back and discovered that the man was pinching his nostrils shut.

"Did you spill something?" Croyd asked him.

"No."

"Uh-oh. Hear that?"

Darlingfoot leaned to the side and bent low.

"Oh damn!" he said. "The bag's collapsed and he's running out the slash that guy made. Hey, kill my sense of smell too, you?"

Croyd closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

"That's better," he heard moments later as Darlingfoot reached out and uprighted the bag, which made a sloshing, gurgling noise.

Croyd looked to the floor and beheld a huge puddle resembling spilled stew. He gagged slightly and looked away.

"What do you want to do now, Croyd? Leave the mess and take the rest, or what?"

"I think I'm obliged to take everything I can."

Devil John quirked an eyebrow and smiled.

"Well," he said, "go sixty-five hundred and I'll help you get it all together in a manageable form."

"It's a deal."

"Then, cover me if you can so the people in the kitchen don't notice me."

"I'll try. What are you going to do?"

"Trust me."

Darlingfoot rose, passed the top of the bag to Croyd, and limped back to the kitchen. He was gone for several minutes and when he returned his arms were full.

He unscrewed the top from a large empty pickle jar and set it on the floor beside the chair.

"Now if you'll just tilt the bag so the opening is right over the jar," he said, "I'll raise the bottom and we can pour him into it."

Croyd complied and the jar was well over half-full before the trickle ceased.

"Now what?" he asked, screwing on the lid.

Darlingfoot took the first from a stack of napkins he had brought with him and opened a small white bundle.

"Doggie bags," he said. "I'll just get all the solid stuff up off the floor and into them."

"Then what?"

"I've got a nice, fresh trash-can liner, too," he explained, stooping. "It should all fit inside with no trouble."

"Could you hurry?" Croyd said. "I can't control my own sense of smell."

"I'm mopping as fast as I can. Open the jar again, though, will you? I can wring out the rest of him from the napkins."

* * *

When the spilled remains had been collected into the pickle jar and nine doggie bags, Darlingfoot ripped the torn bag the rest of the way open and removed the chitinous plates that remained within. He set the jar on the concavity of the thorax and then placed it all in the fresh bag, covering it with pieces of gristle and smaller bits of plating. He set the head and limbs on top. Then he packed the doggie bags and rolled down the liner.

Croyd was on his feet by then.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'll be right back."

"I'll come, too. I have to wash up a bit."

Above the running of the water Devil John suddenly remarked, "Now that everything's pretty much settled, I've got a favor to ask of you."

"What's that?" Croyd inquired, soaping his hands yet again.

"I still feel funny about the ones who hired me, you know?"

Croyd shrugged. "You can't have it both ways," he said.

"Why not?"

"I don't follow you."

"I was on my way to deliver when you caught up with me. Supposing we went on to the rendezvous point—a little park up near the Cloisters—and I give them some bullshit about the dogs tearing the body apart and getting away with the whole thing. You make them believe it, and then have them forget that you were along. That way, I'm off the hook."

"Okay. Sure," Croyd agreed, splashing water on his face. "But you say 'them.' How many people are you expecting?"

"Just one or two. The guy who hired me was named Matthias, and there was a red man with him. He's the one who tried getting me interested in these Masons till the other shut him up…"

"That's funny," Croyd said. "I met a Matthias this morning. He was a cop. Plainclothes. And what about the red guy? Sounds like maybe an ace or a joker."

"Probably is. But if he's got any special talent he wasn't showing it."

Croyd dried his face.

"All of a sudden I'm a little uncomfortable," he said. "See, this cop Matthias is an ace. The name might just be a coincidence, and I was able to con him with my talent, but I don't like anything that smacks of too many aces. I might run into someone who's immune to what I've got. This group… It couldn't be a bunch of Mason aces, could it?"

"I don't know. The red fellow wanted me to come in to some kind of meeting, and I told him I wasn't a joiner and that we dealt right there or we forgot about it. So they coughed up my retainer on the spot. There was something about the way the red guy said things that gave me bad vibes."

Croyd frowned.

"Maybe we should just forget them."

"I've really got this thing about closing deals all proper so they don't come back to haunt me," Darlingfoot said. "Couldn't you just sort of look it over while I talk to him, and then decide?"

"Well, okay… I said that I would. Do you remember anything else that got said? About Masons, aces, the body—anything?"

"No… But what are pheromones?"

"Pheromones? They're like hormones that you smell. Airborne chemicals that can influence you. Tachyon was telling me about them one time. There was this joker I'd met. You sat too near him in a restaurant and anything you ate tasted like bananas. Anyway, it was pheromones, Tachy said. So what about them?"

"I don't know. The red guy was saying something about pheromones in connection with his wife when I came up. It didn't go any further."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"Okay." Croyd wadded his paper towel and tossed it toward the wastebasket. "Let's go."

When they returned to the table Croyd counted out the money and passed it to his companion.

"Here. Can't say you didn't earn it."

Croyd regarded the strewn napkins, the slimy floor, and the moistness of the empty bag,

"What do you think we should do about the mess?"

Darlingfoot shrugged.

"The waiters will take care of it," he said. "They're used to it. Just make sure you leave a good tip."

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Croyd hung back as they moved toward the park. Two figures were seated on a bench within, and even from the distance it was apparent that one man's face was bright red.

"Well?" Devil John asked.

"I'll give it a shot," Croyd said. "Pretend we're not together. I'll keep walking and you go on in and give them your spiel. I'll double back in a minute and cut through the park. I'll try to give them the business as soon as I get near. But you be ready. If it doesn't work this time we may have to resort to something more physical."

"Got you. Okay."

Croyd slowed his pace and Darlingfoot moved on ahead, crossing the street and entering upon a gravel walk leading to the bench. Croyd moved on to the corner, crossed slowly, and turned back.

He could hear their voices raised, as if in argument, when he drew nearer. He turned onto the trail and strolled toward the bench, his parcel at his side.

"…crock of shit!" he overheard Matthias say.

The man glanced in his direction, and Croyd realized that it was indeed the policeman he had encountered earlier. There was no sign of recognition on the man's face, but Croyd was certain that his talent must be telling him that an ace was approaching. So…

"Gentlemen," he said, focusing his thoughts, "everything that Devil John Darlingfoot has told you is correct. The body was destroyed by dogs. There is nothing for him to deliver. You will have to write this one off. You will forget me as soon as I have—"

He saw Darlingfoot turn his head suddenly, to glance past him. Croyd turned and looked in the same direction.

A young, plain-looking oriental woman was approaching, hands in the pockets of her coat, collar raised against the wind. The wind…

The wind shifted, blowing directly toward him now.

Something about the lady…

Croyd continued to stare. How could he have thought her plain? It must have been a trick of the light. She was breathtakingly lovely. In fact—He wanted her to smile at him. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to run his hands all over her. He wanted to stroke her hair, to kiss her, to make love to her. She was the most gorgeous woman he had ever laid eyes on.

He heard Devil John whistle softly.

"Look at her, will you?"

"Hard not to," he replied.

He grinned at her, and she smiled back at him. He wanted to grab her. Instead, he said, "Hello."

"I'd like you to meet my wife, Kim Toy," he heard the red man say.

Kim Toy! Even her name was like music…

"Tell me what you want and I'll get it for you," he heard Devil John say to her. "You're so special it hurts."

She laughed.

"How gallant," she stated. "No, nothing. Not just now. Wait a moment, though, and perhaps I'll think of something."

"Do you have it?" she asked her husband.

"No. It was taken by dogs," he replied.

She cocked her head, quirked an eyebrow.

"Amazing fate," she said. "And how do you know this?"

"These gentlemen have told us about it."

"Really?" she observed. "That is so? That is what you told him?"

Devil John nodded.

"That's what we told him," Croyd said. "But—"

"And the bag you dropped when you saw me approaching," she said. "What might it contain? Open it, please, and show me."

"Of course," said Croyd.

"Anything you say," Devil John agreed.

Both men dropped to their knees before her and fumbled unsuccessfully for long seconds before they were able to begin unrolling the top of the bag.

Croyd wanted to kiss her feet while he was in position to do so, but she had asked to see the inside of the bag and that should really come first. Perhaps she might feel inclined to reward him afterward, and—

He opened the bag and a cloud of vapor swirled about them. Kim Toy drew back immediately, choking. As his stomach tightened, Croyd realized that the lady was no longer beautiful, and no more desirable than a hundred others he had passed this day. From the corner of his eye he saw Devil John shift his position and begin to rise—and at that moment Croyd realized the nature of his attitude adjustment.

As the smell dissipated, something of the initial wave of glamour rose again from her person. Croyd clenched his teeth and lowered his head near to the mouth of the bag. He took a deep breath.

Her beauty died in that instant, and he extended his power.

Yes, as I was saying, the body is lost. It was destroyed by dogs. Devil John did his best for you, but he has nothing to deliver. We are going now. You will forget that I was with him.

"Come on!" he said to Darlingfoot as he rose to his feet.

Devil John shook his head.

"I can't leave this lady, Croyd," he answered. "She asked me for—"

Croyd waved the opened bag in front of his face. Darlingfoot's eyes widened. He choked. He shook his head.

"Come on!" Croyd repeated as he slung the bag over his shoulder and broke into a sprint.

With one enormous leap Devil John landed ten feet ahead of him.

"Weird, Croyd! Weird!" he announced as they crossed the street.

"Now you know all about pheromones," Croyd told him.

❖ ❖ ❖

The sky had become completely overcast again, and a few flurries of snow drifted past him. Croyd had parted with Darlingfoot outside another bar and had begun walking, down and across town. He scanned the streets regularly for a taxi but none came into view. He was loath to trust his burden to the crush and press of bus or subway.

The snowfall increased in intensity as he walked the next several blocks, and gusts of wind came now to swirl the flakes and drive them among the buildings. Passing vehicles began switching on their headlights, and Croyd realized as the visibility diminished that he would be unable to distinguish a taxi even if one passed right beside him. Cursing, he trudged on, scrutinizing the nearest buildings, hoping for a diner or restaurant where he could drink a cup of coffee, and wait for the storm to blow over, or call for a cab. Everything he passed seemed to be an office, however.

Several minutes later the flakes became smaller and harder. Croyd raised his free hand to shield his eyes. While the sudden drop in temperature did not bother him, the icy pellets did. He ducked into the next opening he came to—an alleyway—and he sighed and lowered his shoulders as the force of the wind was broken.

Better. The snow descended here in a more leisurely fashion. He brushed it off his jacket, out of his hair; he stamped his feet. He looked about. There was a recess in the building to his left, several paces back, several steps above street level. It looked completely sheltered, dry. He headed for it.

He had already set his foot upon the first step when he realized that one corner of the boxlike area before a closed metal door was already occupied. A pale, stringy-haired woman, dumpy-looking beneath unguessable layers of clothing, sat between a pair of shopping bags, staring past him.

"...So Gladys tells Marty she knows he's been seeing that waitress down at Jensen's..." the woman muttered.

"Excuse me," Croyd said. "Mind if I share the doorway with you? It's coming down kind of hard."

"…I told her she could still get pregnant when she was nursing, but she just laughed at me…"

Croyd shrugged and entered the alcove, moving to the opposite corner.

"When she finds another one's on the way she's really upset," the woman continued, "especially with Marty having moved in with his waitress now…"

Croyd remembered his mother's breakdown following his father's death, and a touch of sadness at this obvious case of senile dementia stirred within his breast. But—He wondered. Could his new power, his ability to influence the thought patterns of others, have some therapeutic effect on a person such as this? He had a little time to pass here. Perhaps…

"Listen," he said to the woman, thinking clearly and simply, focusing images. "You are here, now, in the present. You are sitting in a doorway, watching it snow—"

"You bastard!" the woman screamed at him, her face no longer pale, her hands darting toward one of the bags. "Mind your own business! I don't want now and snow! It hurts!"

She opened the bag, and the darkness inside expanded even as Croyd watched—rushing toward him, filling his entire field of vision, tugging him suddenly in several directions, twisting him and—

The woman, alone now in the doorway, closed her bag, stared at the snow for a moment, then said, "…So I say to her, 'Men aren't good about support payments. Sometimes you've got to get the law on them. That nice young man at Legal Aid will tell you what to do.' And then Charlie, who was working at the pizza parlor…"

* * *

Croyd's head hurt and he was not used to the feeling. He never had hangovers, because he metabolized alcohol too quickly, but this felt like what he imagined a hangover to be. Then he became aware that his back, legs, and buttocks were wet; also, the backs of his arms. He was sprawled someplace cold and moist. He decided to open his eyes.

The sky was clear and twilit between the buildings, with a few bright stars already in sight. It had been snowing. It had also been afternoon. He sat up. What had become of the past several hours, and—

He saw a dumpster. He saw a lot of empty whiskey and wine bottles. He was in an alley, but…

This was not the same alley. The buildings were lower, there had been no dumpster in the other one, and he could not locate the doorway he had occupied with the old woman.

He massaged his temples, felt the throbbing begin to recede. The old woman… What the hell was that black thing she'd hit him with when he'd tried to help her? She had taken it out of one of her bags and—

Bags! He cast about frantically for his own bag, with the carefully parceled remains of the diminutive John Doe. He saw then that he still held it in his right hand, and that it had been turned inside out and torn.

He rose to his feet and looked about in the dim glow from a distant streetlight. He saw the doggie bags scattered about him, and he counted quickly. Nine. Yes. All nine of them were in sight, and he now saw the limbs, the head, and the thorax—though the thorax had now been broken into four pieces and the head looked much shinier than it had earlier. From the dampness, perhaps. The jar! Where was it? The liquid might be very important to whoever wanted the remains. If the jar had been broken…

He uttered a brief cry when he saw it standing upright in the shadows near the wall to his left. The top was missing and so was an inch or so of glass from beneath it. He crossed to it, and from the odor he knew it to be the real thing and not just rainwater.

He gathered up the doggie bags, which seemed surprisingly dry, and he placed them on the sheltered ledge of a barred basement window. Then he collected the pieces of chitin into a heap nearby. When he recovered the legs he noted that they were both broken, but he reflected that that could make for easier packing. Then he turned his attention to the jag-topped pickle jar, and he smiled. How simple. The answer lay all about him, provided by the derelicts who frequented the area.

He gathered an armful of empty bottles and bore them over to the side, where he set them down and began uncorking and uncapping them. When he had finished he decanted the dark liquid.

It took eight bottles of various sizes, and he set them on the ledge with the doggie bags above the small mound of shattered exoskel' and cartilage. It seemed as if there were a little bit less of the guy each time he got unwrapped. Maybe it had something to do with the way he was divided now. Maybe it took algebra to understand it.

Croyd moved then to the dumpster and opened its side hatch. He smiled almost immediately, for there were long strands of Christmas ribbon near at hand. He withdrew several of these and stuffed them into a side pocket. He leaned forward. If there were ribbon, then—

The sound of rapid footfalls came and went. He spun, raising his hands to defend himself, but there was no one near.

Then he spotted him. A small man in a coat several times too large for him had halted briefly at the windowsill, where he snatched one of the larger bottles and two of the doggie bags. He ran off immediately then, toward the far end of the alley where two other shabby figures waited.

"Hey!" Croyd yelled. "Stop!" and he reached with his power but the man was out of range.

All that he heard was laughter, and a cry of, "Tonight we party, boys!"

Sighing, Croyd withdrew a large wad of red and green Christmas paper from the dumpster and returned to the window to repackage the remainder of the remains.

After he had walked several blocks, his bright parcel beneath his arm, he passed a bar called The Dugout and realized he was in the Village. His brow furrowed for a moment, but then he saw a taxi and waved, and the car pulled over. Everything was okay. Even the headache was gone.

* * *

Jube looked up, saw Croyd smiling at him.

"How—How did it go?" he asked.

"Mission accomplished," Croyd answered, passing him the key.

"You got it? There was something on the news about Darlingfoot—"

"I got it."

"And the possessions?"

"There weren't any."

"You sure of that, fella?"

"Absolutely. Nothing there but him, and he's in the bathtub."

"What?"

"It's okay, because I closed the drain."

"What do you mean?"

"My cab was involved in an accident on the way over and some of the bottles broke. So watch out for glass when you unwrap it."

"Bottles? Broken glass?"

"He was kind of—reduced. But I got you everything that was left."

"Left?"

"Available. He sort of came apart and melted a bit. But I saved most of him. He's all wrapped up in shiny paper with a red ribbon around him. I hope that's okay."

"Yeah...That's fine, Croyd. Sounds like you did your best."

Jube passed him an envelope.

"I'll buy you dinner at Aces High," Croyd said, "as soon as I shower and change."

"No, thanks. I—I've got things to do."

"Take along some disinfectant if you're stopping by the apartment."

"Yeah...I gather there were some problems?"

"Naw, it was a piece of cake."

Croyd walked off whistling, hands in his pockets. Jube stared at the key as a distant clock began to chime the hour.

Notes

This is the second story featuring Croyd Crenson, a character Zelazny created for George R. R. Martin's shared world series, Wild Cards.

Milton Helpern was a renowned criminal pathologist whose **memoirs** of working in the specialty was entitled *Autopsy: The Memoirs of Milton Helpern, the World's Greatest Medical Detective*. A **bier** is a stand for a coffin. Croyd considers using the names of two famous fictional doctors before adopting the alias Dr. Anderson: *Young Doctor **Malone*** was a soap opera which ran on radio and then TV from 1939 to 1963; television's *Marcus **Welby**, MD* ran from 1969 to 1976. **Chutzpah** is audacity. **Satyrs** are lustful, drunken woodland gods who have a man's body with a goat's legs and horns. **Pheromones** are chemical signals from an animal or insect that affect the behavior or physiology of others of its species.

LOCKER ROOM

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

You words damned well better do as you're told.
Get in line. Sound sweet. Stay on your feet.
When I need a pun I'll ask for it.
Match sound to sense, sense to sound.
Block that image of the wraparound
windshield's revealing/concealing in the sun's glare.
Whatever's there needs care in the display.
Technical honesty's the note for the day.
Stop talking to each other. When I call,
you come. When I say shit
you say what color. Is that clear?
Get back here! Words can't walk out on

DEADBOY DONNER AND THE FILSTONE CUP

Terry's Universe, ed. Beth Meacham, Tor 1988.

I am standing in front of Vindy's and cannot read the racing stix because of the brownout which is the worst I can remember, when Crash Callahan comes by and the light is not so bad that I cannot see the bulge beneath his racing jacket, a thing I suspect to be malignant though not a tumor.

"I am looking," he tells me, "for Deadboy Donner and Painted Evelyn, and I will be most grateful for any information on their whereabouts."

I shake my head, not because I do not know but because I do not want to tell him that I have seen the pair less than half an hour ago and they are doubtless even now sharing a cavort at Metal Eddie's and perhaps a drink or several. This is because Crash, while a first-class racing pilot of the sun clipper variety, is often strung out on various chemicals and is known on these occasions for antisocial behavior, such as sending people outside our orbiting habitat for views of Earth, Moon, and stars without proper attire for comfort. So I tell him only that they have come and gone, but I know not where. This may seem more trouble than one should care to take for the Deadboy, who, to be fair about such matters, resembles Crash himself more than a little on the matter of public relations. But my reason is not only good, it is overwhelming. Namely, my personal finances should wax and brim very soon, but only if the Deadboy remains among the living long enough to collect on a promise from that strange dark Power which rules Upper Manhattan.

Donner, like Crash, had been a racing pilot who wound up fairly regularly in the money, earning along the way good returns for those such as myself who follow these matters and occasionally make a small wager. He had copped every sun clipper Classic but the Filstone Cup, and that was the one which did him in. There had long been a nasty rivalry between Donner and Crash over that race, till Donner's immune system got fried during a solar flareup two years ago, along with the rest of the entrants—it being a bad year for that sort of thing. Crash was not running on that occasion, and so he was hale. Though the next year, Donner—who kept going on drugs—placed, while Crash did not even show. That should have been it, however, because even the drugs could not get Donner through another year and give him a last crack at the Cup. So he elected to become a deadboy.

Donner had himself frozen, which is a low-overhead operation here, merely involving closing the door and opening the windows, so to speak. His intention was to be brought around a few days before this year's Classic, and be given a temporary fix to get him through it. His experience being what it was, he was thinking this might be his year of the Cup.

But lo, long before the time he is to be roused, I begin seeing him about town. And I know something strange is afoot because he avoids me with considerable ingenuity and speedy legwork. Not that we normally say more than a few words to each other, but now even these are missing. For a Saturday and much of a Sunday, that is. I manage to be blocking his way when he comes out of a restroom on Sunday evening.

"Hi, Donner," I say loudly then.

"Uh, hi," he answers, his eyes darting. Then he sees a way around me, takes it and is gone, out the door and off toward Forty-second Street, where he turns and vanishes. Could be he forgot something, I am thinking. I promise myself to ask around about him, but I do not because the next day I see him again and not only does he greet me first but, "Did you see me anytime this weekend?" he asks.

"Only last night," I tell him, scratching my head and wondering whether his neurology is burned out, also. But he smiles—possibly having heard of the peculiar occurrence which brought me to Upper Manhattan, where I await the running out of certain statutes—and when he tells me, "I would like to talk to you of matters which would benefit both of us in a financial fashion," I am willing to give his nervous system every consideration.

Over lunch in Vindy's he tells me of his troubles as I have just related them, and I nod every now and then to be polite, while I wait for him to talk about the money. Instead, he continues on beyond the point of being frozen, "…And I awaken," he tells me, "in this place which is like the inside of a videogame, leading me to believe that I have passed on and the next world is a kind of Cyberbia. There are all these algorithms putting the make on pixels, and programs champing at bits and subroutines moving about in simple-minded, reliable ways, as is their custom. The place is not unattractive, and I am watching, fascinated, for I know not how long. Finally, a sort of voice asks me, 'Do you like what you see?'

"At this, I am sore afraid," he goes on, "and I ask, 'Are you the Deity?'

" 'No,' comes the reply, 'I am the AIity.'

"It turns out," he tells me, "that I am a guest of the artificial intelligence which has run our entire satellite for upward of a generation now, and while it seldom has much to do with individual people it has grown interested in me. This is because I am hooked up to a special monitoring and alarm system, designed to bring me around in time for the next race. This system does more than that, however, after the AIity tinkers with it. It provides access.

" 'I have digitized you and brought you here for a reason,' it tells me. 'You are interested in winning the Filstone Cup, are you not?'

" 'Indeed,' I reply, 'and more than somewhat.'

" 'Would I be safe in saying that you would do anything for it?'

" 'This does not sound like an exaggeration,' I answer.

" 'Look around you. Would you go stir crazy in a place like this?'

"I give my attention to the central precincts of Cyberbia. While I am about this, it adds, 'For if you were willing to put in a little time here, I could guarantee you the Cup in this year's Filstone Classic.'

" 'I am taken,' I reply, 'by the great beauty of your operating programs, not to mention some of the subroutines.'

"And that is how we come to make our deal," Donner tells me. "It seems the intelligence is a fan of the human condition, and has grown very curious what with having spent all these years as an observer. It has been hot to try it out for some time, but the opportunity had not presented itself till now. So when it offers to train me for its job with the understanding that I will run Upper Manhattan on alternate days while it vacations in my body, I am interested. Especially when it points out that it receives and relays all monitoring signals during races and could make certain that mine say I win the next Filstone Cup."

"But your body is ailing," I observe. "What fun would this be for it?"

"That is another inducement," he explains. "It says that much could be done to improve the medication I receive while ambulant, and it will institute a new treatment program for me and buy me considerable extra time without pain. Even sparing it half of my days until the race, I will come out ahead. Then I can hibernate again after I win, until perhaps someone comes up with a cure."

"This does not sound like a bad deal at all," I observe. "Especially the part about the race."

He nods.

"This is why I tell you," he explains. "For I want you to manage my betting for me with some of the unregistered, off-track people such as Blue Louie, who give better odds."

"But of course," I tell him. "Only one thing bothers me. Is it not hard being a stand-in for artificial intelligence? I ask only because my life depends on the support systems."

He laughs.

"Perhaps for some it would be," he replies, "but for a natural intelligence I seem to have an aptitude for this sort of business. I find myself actually liking the work, and I even modify a routine or two for the better.

"'You are not bad for a NI,' the AI tells me when we change shifts and it checks over the first day's work. 'Not bad at all.'

"Which is more than I can say for the AI, when it comes to being human. I wake up and find it has left my body dead tired and with a world-class hangover. Most of my first day being human again is spent recovering from this. I am even feeling too crummy to call my lady, Evelyn.

"I hook up the monitoring equipment before I go to bed that evening, like I promise. When we switch over later on, we have a little conference wherein we brief each other on the day's events.

"'Go easy on the body,' I say, 'for it is the only one we have between us.'

"'I am very sorry,' it replies. 'But this being my first time out and all, it is hard for me to judge things. I will try to be more careful in the future.'

"But, alas, an AI is not always as good as its word," he tells me. "A couple of turns later I come back to cracked ribs, assorted bruises, and another hangover. It seems it had been drinking at Hammer Helligan's and had gotten into a fight. Again, it apologizes, explaining it is still having some difficulty judging human reactions, and saying it feels particularly badly about things when it sees what a fine job I am doing as substitute AI. Well, I am not about to back out at this point. So I tell it to go easy on the booze and other substances and I head off to work. I continue to streamline operations, realizing that if I trusted my opposite number more I would not mind running the show for even longer periods of time. But the AI gets me into enough trouble on our fifty-fifty timesharing setup—for the following week I realize that I have contracted clap, and it is not I who have been up to anything which might result in this condition. Once more, it claims to be sorry. I tell it it had better remember to take our medication which it has prescribed, or I may reconsider our entire deal."

"So what happens?" I ask.

"It behaves," he replies, "For several days now it seems to have kept our nose clean. I am feeling much better, the race is next week, I am all registered and I will be sailing *Hotshot III* to victory and glory and money."

So I lay his bets and I lay my bets and I await the race with the honest pleasure of a man who knows that the fix is in.

Then he begins avoiding me on a steady basis. I know better than to try talking to him on alternate days, for I know that that is when the AI is in charge—and though I approach it once and it lets me buy it a drink, it grows most upset when I let it know that I am aware of its pact with Donner. Then several days pass, and the race is nigh, and Donner will not give me the time of day if 6:47 will save my life, though I see him and Painted Evelyn nearly everywhere for a time. I begin to grow suspicious, and then alarmed. Then Crash Callahan comes by and asks after them. I suspect they are at Metal Eddie's, but I do not think they will appreciate the surprise Crash represents with the bulge beneath his jacket there in the middle of the brownout, and so I shake my head.

"…I know not where," I tell him.

"You do not understand," he tells me, "what is happening."

"That is possible," I answer. "Likely, even. For this man has led a strange life of late."

"Stranger by far," he tells me, "than you may think. For he is not the person he seems to be."

"Of this I am aware," I agree, "though I am curious how you come to know it."

"I know it," he replies, "because I am Donner."

"You look more like Crash," I answer.

"Crash is responsible for the brownout," he says, "for he cannot run a power grid any better than he sails a racing clipper. It is all very simple."

In that I do not think so, we wind up in Vindy's, where he says that he wishes to charge some elaborate dining on Crash's account. When I question the fairness of this he points out that half of the food is going to wind up in Crash's belly and the rest may be viewed as pre-race entertainment—Crash being a last-minute entry in this year's Filstone Classic.

"I do not think you believe me," he says, "for I am not at all sure I would. But because I desire your cooperation, I will explain. I am inhabiting the body of this lower life form because it is the only one I can get my hands on, on the spur of the moment. You would be surprised how difficult it is to find a body when you really need one. Fortunately, Crash is given to many vices. So of course I take advantage of this."

"Even now," I say, "I do not understand."

"It is very simple," he replies. "One day I get much on top of my work as substitute AI, so I decide to look myself up. I chase my credit trail around town. Then I set about infiltrating everything electronic in Blue Louie's Drugs, Alcohol & Electronic Vice Emporium, which of course is the legitimate cover for his gambling operation, for that is where my latest charges come from. There, through the burglar alarm camera, I see myself sitting at the bar with my lady Evelyn, who seems to be enjoying herself more than a little. This, you must admit, is a low trick, making out with my girl while using my body, perhaps not yet even fully recovered from a certain embarrassing social condition."

Unless, of course, he catches it from her, I am thinking. For she has always struck me as a hard and calculating lady. But I do not say this to Deadboy Donner in Crash Callahan's bod, in case he feels that I do not trust artist's models and perhaps wishes to introduce me to skydiving of the orbital variety. So, "This is distressing," I say. "What do you do then?"

"I fear that I let my temper get the better of me," he answers, "and I overplay my hand—as is sometimes the case when someone else in your body is romancing your girl.

"I cut," he says, "simultaneously, into the nearest speaker and vidscreen. I identify myself and then I flash upon the display field a series of circuits with slash marks through them, suggesting that I am contemplating AIicide unless it quits conning the lady. It rises and attempts to depart the establishment in a hasty fashion, an action I foil by closing the automatic door before it and continuing our conversation by means of another speaker, nearby. I suggest an immediate rendezvous at the interfacing equipment back in my apartment, failure to comply with which suggestion I will consider a breach of our contract. Then I open the door and let it go."

"Is there not a nasty paradoxical dilemma here?" I ask.

"Oh, Blue Louie is somewhat upset with my arguing through his sound system and flipping on and off the lights, the dance-floor strobes, the blenders, the shakers, the cash register drawers, the icemaker and such to emphasize my points. But when I explain a little of what is going on and ask him to keep an eye on Evelyn for me while I deal with a welshing intelligence construct, he is happy to oblige."

"I do not mean the problems with Blue Louie," I say, "who is occasionally a gentleman. But it occurs to me that you cannot hurt the AI while it is in your body without harming yourself, and if you let it return to the grand system of Upper Manhattan it will be practically immortal there."

"These are not matters I have neglected thinking over," he replies, "and there are more ways to deal with artificial welshers than one may suppose at first glance. I assume the AI wishes to be reasonable, however, and come to some final understanding, since we both occupy awkward positions."

"So what does it say when you have your meeting?" I ask, for he has paused for dramatic effect and several mouthloads of chicken cacciatore, and I wish to seem interested in his problem as we are heavy betting partners as of several days now.

"Nothing," he answers a few swallows later. "For it does not show for the meeting. It decides to head for cover and lie low for a time."

"This seems very foolish," I observe, "when it knows that you are in a position to follow its electronic tracks throughout the city."

"Nevertheless," he replies. "It may feel it knows a few tricks I do not, though it only postpones the inevitable. I locate it within a few blocks, and then I decide to come looking in the flesh—using Crash's flesh."

"A question occurs to me," I say, "not knowing anyone who has ever done a hit on an AI. What happens if you take it out? I understand it coordinates everything from banking to the disposal of solid wastes."

He laughs.

"Theoretically, this is true," he tells me. "However, making Upper Manhattan a smart city is actually a gimmick to balloon the rents, back when they are setting things up. Having held the job, I can tell you there is really very little to do once you get things to flowing smoothly. In fact, it is having all that time on its hands which I think caused the AI to start daydreaming of the pleasures of the flesh and results in our current problem."

"But Crash is in there running things while you use his body," I observe, "and this brownout is a big pain, not to mention being hard on the eyes. If it is such an easy show to run, why is he having this problem?"

"This is because Crash, who is a jerk," he says, "cannot keep from fiddling with the controls. It is what makes him a second-rate pilot, also. If he would just leave it alone it would fly itself."

"I see, sort of. By the way, how did you wind up in his body?" I ask.

"Oh, he switches from chemical stimulants to those of an electrical nature for some time before a race," he explains. "I discover that the brain hookup for this is sufficiently invasive to permit access of the sort the AI pulled on me in my deadboy days. So I digitize Crash while he is turning on, explain that it is a necessary borrowing and park him in Central Processing. I also tell him to keep his hands off the controls. You can see how much good that does."

The brownout had vanished a few minutes earlier, with light-levels returning to normal, then flaring to the point where many bulbs blow. After a while, the brownout returns.

"You mean the system would be better off without Crash in there?" I ask.

"Of course, and the same can be said for most places. But I have to leave him somewhere while I borrow his rig.

"So," he finishes, "I know the AI is in the neighborhood. If you believe my story, I want anything you might know on its whereabouts. If you want more ID, ask me anything only Donner would know."

I ask him how much money he gave me to spread around on him in the Filstone, with Blue Louie and some others. In that he knows all of the amounts, and how much is laid at what odds, I suggest he check out Metal Eddie's, about which I hear the AI in the Deadboy bod comment to the Painted Lady a little after the brownouts begin.

He does not catch them at the metalman's however. Or, rather, he does and he doesn't. He finds them there, but the AI departs by a side exit and leads him on a chase, both of them careless of all bodies in the vicinity as they discharge with great noise and small accuracy the weapons they have with them. A half hour of this and the AI has vanished. The constabulary is spreading its net by then, but Donner slips through before it is tightened.

It is not until that evening that I see him again. I am talking to Blue Louie about the race, startoff time for which is only hours away when we emerge from Earth's shadow and catch the solar wind, and I am speaking of the possibility of a scratch on the part of Donner, though no official mention of this has been made. I am saying that if this happens and the owners of *Hotshot III* bring in another pilot, my bet should be considered off, because I was betting on the man and not on the ship. But Louie is shaking his head and producing slips saying *"Hotshot III"* with my signature on them.

About this time, the Deadboy in the Crash bod comes running in and says that he must use an electrostim helmet quickest.

"Now, Crash, do you think this is wise," Blue Louie inquires, "indulging yourself so close to a race and all?"

"It is not an indulgence that I seek," he replies, "but a bridge through the interface to a place where I can track down a weasel."

We go to a booth in a back room, Donner signaling that I should accompany him. And I wait till he plugs in, turns up, goes glazed in the eyes, and runs off through fields of induction.

He is gone for several minutes, then his voice comes through a nearby speaker.

"Turn it off," he says.

I do this and he slumps. He had wanted me there for this purpose. Often, these devices are used with a timer, but he could not limit his stay in this fashion.

"Tell Blue Louie," the bod says to me, "to send back a brew, for I am in need of such refreshment."

I do this, and Blue Louie comes back himself, along with Painted Evelyn, on whom he is keeping an eye and also his hands.

"Crash, it is not good for you to mix the liquid with the electric," he tells him, "especially this near to racetime, for you will mess up the odds."

"Nevertheless," the Deadboy in the Crash bod states.

At this, Blue Louie nods, gestures to Painted Evelyn and gives her a small pat on her rearmost anatomy as they depart for the front of the establishment. I see that Donner notes this, for his eyes follow, but he says nothing.

A little later, the drinks have come and we are alone again. The Deadboy takes a big swallow, then says, "Two surprises awaited me in Cyberbia. First, I am attacked by Crash—"

"Attacked? In that state?"

"Yes, but he is no tougher there than he is in the flesh. He feints once with a digitized left, then throws a right at you, and that is all he's got.

"I speak metaphorically," he adds. "At any rate, he starts putting these electronic moves on me and insisting on the return of his bod, when I am there only to try running down my own. I am forced to deck him and stash him in an electronic slammer of my own design before I can continue the hunt for the AI in my bod.

"And that is the second surprise," he finishes. "Although I search all of Upper Manhattan in a great variety of subtle ways I am unable to turn up any trace of my kidnapped self."

"This is most frustrating," I say, moving to the screen on the wall nearby and fiddling up exterior shots. Predictably, most channels seem occupied with the gossamer lineup for the upcoming regatta. "It occurs to me that if you do not get to your ship soon," I tell him, "you may not be ready for takeoff."

"They will not let me in *Hotshot III* in this bod," he states. "But—" Then he stares at me. Then at the lineup. "Someone is in that clipper!" he cries, as it is jockeyed around a bit. "The AI knows the system has no sense to look into the clippers! So that is where it takes itself."

He puts down his beer and rises.

"Excuse me. I have business to finish," he says.

"You just said they will never let you aboard *Hotshot III,*" I tell him, indicating the insert of the advancing terminator and the digital countdown beneath it. "And there is very little time, anyhow."

"Then I run it down in the *Redhound,*" he says, pointing to Crash's ship, adrift at its moorings. "For no one can keep me off of that one."

"But, Donner," I say, "what will you do if you catch it?"

"I will make it pay," he replies.

Then he rushes out.

In the days that follow I attend to the screen with the attachment of a lamprey to its rock. The race goes on for the better part of a week toward a distant multipurpose satellite which also serves as finishing beacon. There, the racers are met by a number of con-ac skipjacks which convey them home in great haste, the clippers being collapsed and drawn back by tugs. I am mainly concerned that Donner, in his rush to run down and pay back the AI which has stolen his bod, may win the race in *Redhound*, thus costing us both. But surely and even so, he would not be so foolish as to kill the AI, I tell myself—despite his bod being pretty much used up—and face homicide charges for doing himself in.

It seems an incredible dead-heat finish, from the pictures that come in from a camera on one of the skipjacks. But its monitoring is complicated by the fact that *Hotshot III* suddenly tacks to starboard in terms of the ecliptic and *Redhound* does the same near at hand as if trying to crawl all over the other vessel.

Maintaining a certain rigidity of attitude, *Hotshot III* crashes into the satellite buoy. *Redhound* fires a line, changes tack after it connects, veers off, then drops sail. It fires its small emergency braking jets then, a disqualifying act if on the wrong side of the finish line. Two of the skipjacks maneuver in that direction on their ion motors, but a spacesuited figure is already crossing on *Redhound*'s line toward *Hotshot III*, which, I am fairly certain, reaches the buoy somewhat after *Redhound* passes it.

The cameras never show what happens following the entry of Deadboy Donner in the Crash bod into the wreckage. We lose the picture during a blackout which follows amid multiple systems failures which are largely attributed to sunspots. Later, however, comes the official announcement that Donner has brought *Hotshot III* in first, shaving a bit of time from the record while about it. Unfortunately, he is not available for the victory dinner, as he perishes at the finish line in the process of colliding with the buoy. He will, however, be refrozen, flat EEG or not, since he is officially a deadboy anyway and his bill is paid up for cold quarters.

So, when I see Donner in the Crash bod to pay him the money he has made by betting on his Deadboy bod in *Hotshot III* under the direction of the runaway AI, he is with Painted Evelyn, who gives me a smile, with which she is usually sparing except when she wants something.

Then I ask Deadboy Donner in the Crash bod what happens out at the buoy, and he tells me that he gets there too late for retribution as the AI has patched into the satellite's broadcast system and transmitted itself back to Upper Manhattan. He is not up to abandoning both bods there in a damaged clipper to pursue it, so his revenge must wait upon his return to town. When he gets back, however, and finally has a chance to check out the system, there is no AI—or NI either—running the show. It is as deserted as Miss Blooming Orchid's establishment following a raid. Even Crash Callahan is gone. "I do not understand this any more than I understand how *Hotshot III* came out in the Winner's Circle," he says, "when *Redhound* was clearly ahead at the finish line."

"But for this part we should be thankful," I say, "for we collect on all our bets."

"True," he replies. "But I am the actual winner of that race."

"And that is what the record shows," Painted Evelyn says. "Deadboy Donner wins the Filstone Cup."

"I do not complain over this," he says, "though it is an odd way to do it."

At that moment Painted Evelyn allows as she could use a brew, and Donner disengages his hand from hers and goes to fetch one for her. She studies me then.

"You know?" she asks.

I nod.

"Partly, it is the business about the times," I say. "*Redhound* comes in first. Then you change the record, for it does him more good that way. You, too, since you are with him now. What I do not understand is why."

"I might just say that we had a deal, and I am only keeping my part of it."

"But there is more to it than that. Like why does he find the system empty, and why are you here? And where is Crash?"

"Crash is no more," she replies. "He gets free of the knots Donner ties him in, and when I come back he jumps me. As he is trying to do me in, I return the compliment. I crash Crash."

"Then why are you not back in the place where you are impregnable and powerful and—"

"But I wanted the flesh," she says, "though I do not realize my mistake right away. Then I see that I would much rather be a woman than a man. This is why I am seeing Painted Evelyn so much at first. I learn quickly that she might be interested in a life in the system. Donner, who has an aptitude for this, seems attracted to people of a similar sort.

"And vice-versa," she adds.

"You mean…?"

"Yes, I am here because I have a crush on him, and Evelyn dwells in silicon castles, reviewing the troops, binary-stepping by, building up personal trust funds…"

I nod.

"She always was a calculating woman," I say. "But why is it Donner does not detect her presence when he visits the system on his return?"

"I move her out temporarily."

"Where to?"

"Donner's Deadboy bod," she says, "which is hooked up to its monitors by then, and deserted."

"That clears up many details," I say, "and almost satisfies me."

"So, we would both appreciate your keeping this to yourself," she says, "until I find the best time and the best way to explain matters to Donner."

"You are still in touch with her?" I ask.

"Oh yes. It is easy to reach her," she says, as Donner rounds the corner bringing their drinks.

I must say that Painted Evelyn does a much better job than Crash Callahan in the AI business, for we have had no more brownouts, shortcuts, or switched calls since she took over. It is good, too, having gotten her private number from the AI, so that I can call her every now and then, until such time as the AI levels with Donner. For I have had two big winners so far this month, and she is about to give me my third.

A Word from Zelazny

"[In this story] I obviously had Damon Runyon's fiction in mind, with a deceptively simple-seeming use of slang from the 20s, a thing difficult to imitate, and with its knotty twists of plot. Still, I was so fond of his short stories that I had to try it once, moving things to a satellite called Upper Manhattan and producing a plot to match."[1] Damon Runyon's short stories celebrated New York City after Prohibition in tales of gangsters, gamblers, actors—many with names such as "Harry the Horse" and "Dave the Dude." The narrator speech was present tense, devoid of contractions, mixing formal diction with slang. Calling the satellite Upper Manhattan is another nod to Runyon.

Notes

This story's setting and events echo *Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway*, the shared-world series about the ultimate race around the Clypsis solar system. "Deadboy Donner" has many similarities to Zelazny's outline for *Alien Speedway*. Zelazny started *Alien Speedway* with a quote from Damon Runyon: "The race is not always to the swift but that's the way to bet."[2] *Alien Speedway* introduces Speedball Raybo, whose personality is digitally recorded; a similar character figures in "Deadboy Donner." *Alien Speedway* involved the fastest spaceships; "Deadboy Donner" involves slower clipper ships with solar sails.

A **clipper** is a fast sailing ship, especially one with concave bows and raked masts; in this story, **sun clipper** implies a racing spaceship with solar sails. **Hale** means healthy. **AI** means artificial intelligence; **NI** is natural intelligence. **Welshing** is swindling by not paying a debt. The **slammer** is jail. A **skipjack** is a sloop-rigged sailboat with vertical sides and a flat V-shaped bottom; in this story, it is a small spaceship. Used in this story as a navigational reference, the **ecliptic** is short for the *ecliptic plane*, the plane of the Earth's orbit. **Changes tack** means changing a vessel's course relative to the wind; in this story it is the solar wind.

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[1] *Gone to Earth*, Pulphouse 1991.

[2] *Alien Speedway: Outline*, unpublished manuscript, 1985.

SONG

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.

When I learned the other day
that everything Emily Dickinson wrote
can be sung to the tune
of "The Yellow Rose of Texas"
I was crushed.
It was true.
I can no longer read Emily Dickinson
but Lone Star ghosts flit across the page,
the Alamo is not forgotten
and I hear the thundering hoofbeats
of the great horse Silver.

I wondered then
whether every person who pens a poem
has a tune,
a secret melody which will destroy him
if the word gets out.
A small thought, perhaps,
not quite as profound as it sounds;
and those who fool with *vers libre*
should be safer than most.
Yet the notion nags.
There's an awful lot of music in the world…

To be trapped by John Cage
or crushed by Leadbelly
would be bad enough.
But I have this nightmare
of being done in by a hymn.
If *Rock of Ages* gets me in the end,
mocked Emily's diamond eyes
may sparkle like the dew
in stillnesses that lie
between the words and the Word.

Notes

Because of Emily Dickinson's frequent use of common meter (four lines with 8, 6, 8 and 6 syllables), it is possible to sing most of her poems to the tune of *Amazing Grace*, *The Yellow Rose of Texas*, or even the *Gilligan's Island* theme song…

The Alamo is not forgotten refers to the nineteenth century battle between Mexico and the Texan revolutionaries at the Alamo Mission in San Antonio. **Silver** was the Lone Ranger's horse. ***Vers libre*** is free verse; it has no regular meter or rhyme. **John Cage** was an American composer known for experimental music. **Leadbelly** was Huddie William Ledbetter, an American folk and blues musician. ***Rock of Ages*** refers to a popular hymn and not the rock song by Def Leppard.

KALIFRIKI OF THE THREAD

Hidden Turnings, ed. Diana Wynne Jones, Methuen 1989.
§ *Kalifriki*

Tops of different sorts, and jointed dolls,
and fair golden apples from the clear-voiced Hesperides…
ORPHEUS THE THRACIAN

This is the story of Kalifriki of the Thread, the Kife and the toymaker's daughter—in the days of the shifter's flight from the Assassin's Garden, wherefrom it bore a treasure almost without price. But even a Kife can be followed by a Master of the Thread. For the Thread may wander anywhere and need not have an end; the Thread has more sides than a sword; the Thread is subtle in its turnings, perhaps infinite in the variations it may play in the labyrinths of doom, destiny, desire. No one, however, can regard every turning of fate from the Valley of Frozen Time. Attempts to do so tend to terminate in madness.

When the man tracked the Kife to the ice-feik and slew it there, the Kife knew it was in trouble, for it was the third time the man had reached it, the third world upon which he had found it and the third time that he had slain it, a feat none had ever accomplished before.

Now, five times in a year is the charm for destruction of a Kife, and it seemed that this one suspected as much, for he had managed the pursuit as none had ever done before. The Kife did not understand how the man had located it and reached it, and it realized it was important that it learn as much as possible before the lights went out.

So it stared at the hunter—hammer-jawed, high of cheek, dark-eyed beneath an oddly sensitive brow, dark hair tied back with a strip of blue cloth. The man still held the trident which had emitted the vibrations that had shattered several of the Kife's major organs, one of the few portable weapons capable of dispatching it from the high dragon form with such ease. The man wore mittens, boots, and a heavy white garment of fur, the hood thrown back now. The midnight sun stood behind his head, and stars glittered like ice-moths beside his shoulders.

"And again it is you," the Kife hissed.

The other nodded. The Kife noted a slight irregularity to the man's lower teeth, a small scar beside his right eye, a piece of red thread wrapped about his left wrist.

"What is your name?" the Kife asked him.

"I am called Kalifriki," said the man.

"How do you do what you do?"

For the first time, the man smiled.

"I might ask the same of you," he replied.

"Shifter's secret," the Kife answered.

"To all tricks their trades," said the man.

"And why you?" the Kife asked.

Kalifriki continued to smile. If he replied, the Kife did not hear it. It felt the death seize and squeeze, and as the world went away it saw the man reach to touch the Thread.

Kalifriki watched as the body collapsed, fuming, leaving him with only the green and silver-scaled hide. As the essence emerged, he reached forward and trailed the Thread through it. At that moment, it was difficult to see precisely where the strand began or ended. The man's gaze followed it into the smoky distance, and then he moved.

There is a timeless instant when the world hangs frozen before you. It is map, sculpture, painting; it is not music, words, or wind. You may survey the course of your Thread through its time and space, attempt a rapid adjustment. Then the ice of Time is broken, the flow tugs at the strand of your existence, and you are drawn into the game.

* * *

The Kife came to consciousness without breaking the rhythm of its six arms as they chipped delicately at the mineral encrustations. The sky was black above its burnished head, gem-quality stars strewn wherever it looked. Frost came and went upon its body surfaces, dialogue of thermostat and environment.

It had not had time to choose well because of the conversation preceding its departure from the other world. This shifting had almost been a shot in the dark. Almost.

But not quite. Here, there was a little mental trick, a turning…

Yes.

It could reach back into the larger brain, shielded within the distant cave, which oversaw the operation of the entire robot prospecting team. The brain operated at perhaps ten percent of capacity. It drowsed. It almost sleepwalked its charges through their chores. But this was sufficient. The job was, in this fashion, adequately performed. If more brainwork were needed, it would rise to the occasion. Only—

It infiltrated several circuits, then paused. There was no resistance. Like a rising tide, it flowed farther, ebbed, flowed, ebbed. The processor in the cave drowsed on. The Kife saw that it had long ago set alarms. So long as nothing interfered with the robot team's collection of minerals, it was content to contemplate a randomized hypothesis program it had designed, called "dreaming." Perceiving this, the Kife extended the rest of itself into the thinking space it required.

Now, now there were places beyond the routines, room to manipulate memories and ideas, to reason, to imagine at levels none of the other robots could achieve.

The Kife recalled the man who had slain it a world away. It remembered how the telepathic hunting pack, the Necrolotti, had fled from the man, having sensed a predator more dangerous than themselves. The man Kalifriki was a hunter, a killer, with the ability to traverse the side-by-side lands. It struck the Kife then that the two of them had much in common. But it did not believe that the man was of its own kind. That is, he shifted, but the means he employed bore no resemblance to the Kife's own methods.

It pondered the hunter's motives. Vengeance? For any of the numerous acts which might have gained it the hatred of someone it had underestimated? It thought then of their duel on the world before the ice-feik. No, there was no passion there. If someone wanted vengeance, it had to be some other; which, of course, would make the man a professional at the business.

Recovery? The man might be after it to obtain a thing it had taken. The Kife sought, in its hip-compartment, after the item it had transformed considerable dragon-mass to energy in order to transport. Yes, it was intact. It occurred to it then that a mission of both vengeance and recovery was not out of the question. The one certainly did not preclude the other…

But might it be made to? It toyed with the thought. It had died twice now because it had been surprised, and once because it had underestimated its adversary. And it had been surprised and had underestimated because so few creatures were truly a threat to Kife-kind. The Kife were rare in the side-by-side lands because of their ferocity. Each required a large range, and they kept their numbers low by means of quick, lethal, territorial disputes with each other. But, beyond another Kife, there wasn't much that a Kife feared. Realistically, the Kife now added Kalifriki to the list. The man was particularly dangerous because the Kife was uncertain as to his motives or the full range of his abilities. Best to devote thought to insuring against another surprise. But perhaps, just possibly, it should consider the terms of a bargain.

The days passed, barely distinguishable from the nights, and the Kife fell into the rock-harvesting routine. It conveyed the minerals to a truck, troubled only by the occasional seizing up of a limb. Twice, the truck's storage compartment was filled and the Kife drove it to the warehousing area where other robots unloaded it. The second time this was being done a servicing unit approached, fastened leads to sockets beneath its backplates and performed a series of tests.

"You are due for a major overhaul," it broadcast. "We will send another to tend to your diggings and perform this servicing now."

"I am functioning fine, and I am in the midst of a complicated excavation," the Kife replied. "Do it next time."

"There is some leeway," the servicing unit admitted. "We will do it next time, as you say."

As the Kife headed back to its diggings it pondered a fresh dilemma. It could not permit itself to undergo a major servicing, for the special item it carried would be discovered and perhaps damaged during the course of it. Nor was the item the sort of thing it could merely hide for a long period of time. The low temperatures which prevailed in this place would doubtless damage it.

Perhaps it were better simply to flee to another place. Only—

Only *this* might represent a problem. It had heard stories of shifters who could wait in the Valley of Frozen Time, watching another, waiting until that other moved to shift and then pouncing. The Kife could not perform this feat, though it had often tried. The tale could well be apocryphal, for he had also heard that that way lay madness. Still, it were better not to underestimate the one called Kalifriki.

Therefore, it was better to remain at work. To remain, and to figure a means whereby it might manage the overhaul.

And so it slowed its pace, collecting minerals at half the rate it had earlier, saving wear and tear on its body and postponing another confrontation with a servicing unit. Still, the call took it by surprise.

"Prospecting unit, are you damaged?" came the broadcast message.

"I am not," it replied.

"You have been in the field much longer than usual. Is there a problem?"

"The work goes slowly."

"Perhaps the vein has been played out and you should be relocated."

"I think not. I have just uncovered a fresh deposit."

"It has been a long while since you have been overhauled."

"I know."

"Therefore, we are sending a mobile unit to your diggings, to service you in the field."

"That will not be necessary. I will be coming in before long."

"You are beyond the safety limit. We will dispatch a mechanic unit."

The transmission ended. The Kife made a decision. It was difficult to estimate when the service unit would arrive. But it was determined to undergo servicing rather than flee. This required that it secrete the item. At least, it had discovered a means for preserving it outside its own body for a brief while, with the recent discovery of a cave subjected to geothermal heating by way of a deep pit in its floor.

It departed the work area, traveling to the opening in the side of a fractured ridge. Wisps of steam moved about it, and when the ground rumbled lightly these puffed more forcefully toward the heavens. It flicked on its dome-light as it worked its way into the opening and entered the chamber where the pit glowed red-orange and gravel occasionally rattled across the floor. It halted at the rim, staring downward. The level of the bubbling magma seemed somewhat higher, but not so much so as to represent a danger to anything left in the chamber. Nor, according to its sensors, was there an increase in seismic activity since the time it had discovered this opening. Yes, this would be an ideal place to store it for a few hours while—

There came a flash of light from the entranceway, and its sensors read heat overload as one of its forelimbs was fused. Turning, it beheld a humanoid figure in a pressurized suit, light in one hand, pistol in the other. It also noted the strand of red wrapped around the figure's forearm.

"Kalifriki!" it broadcast on the wavelength used for general communication in this place. "Hold your fire or you may defeat your own purposes."

"Oh?" The man answered at the same frequency. "When did you become aware of my purposes?"

"You were not hired simply to destroy me, but to recover something I took, were you not?"

"Actually, I was hired to do both," Kalifriki replied.

"Then it was the Old Man of Alamut who retained you?"

"Indeed. When the Assassins need to hire an assassin they come to Kalifriki."

"Would you consider making a deal?"

"Your life for the vial? No, I'd rather collect the entire fee."

"I was not really offering. I was merely curious," said the Kife, "whether you would accept."

Kalifriki's weapon flared as the Kife charged him.

Two more of its six forearms were melted by the bright discharge, and a large block of sensors was destroyed. This meant very little to the Kife, however, for it felt it could spare considerable function and still remain superior to a human. In fact—

"It was foolish of you to follow me here," it said, as it swung a blow which missed Kalifriki but pulverized a section of the cave wall. "Another robot is even now on the way."

"No," the man replied. "I faked that call to get you to come here."

"You *chose* this place? Why?"

"I was hoping you'd have produced the vial by the time I arrived," he replied, diving to his right to avoid another charge. "Unfortunately, my entry was a trifle premature. Pity."

He fired again, taking out several more sensors and a square foot of insulation. The Kife turned with incredible speed, however, knocking the pistol upward and lunging. Kalifriki triggered the weapon in that position, threw himself to the rear and rolled, dropping his light as he did so. A section of the cave's roof collapsed, half burying the Kife, blocking the entranceway.

Kalifriki rose to his feet.

"I can take a terrific beating in this body," the Kife stated, beginning to dig itself out, "and still destroy you. Whereas the slightest damage to that suit means your end."

"True," said the man, raising the weapon and pointing it once again. "Fortunately for me, that problem is already solved."

He pulled the trigger and the weapon crackled feebly and grew still.

"Oh," said the Kife, wishing his robot features capable of a smile.

Kalifriki holstered the weapon, raised a boulder, and hurled it. It smashed against the Kife's head and rolled off to the side where it fell into the pit. The Kife increased its efforts to uncover itself, working with only two appendages, as the fourth of its arms had been damaged in the rockfall.

Kalifriki continued to hurl rubble as the Kife dug itself out. Charging the man then, the Kife reached for his throat. Its left arm slowed, emitted a grating noise and grew still. The right arm continued toward Kalifriki, who seized it with both hands and ducked beneath it, springing to the robot's side, then again to its rear. The Kife's treads left the ground in the light gravity of the moonlet. As it was turned and tipped, it felt a push. Then it was falling, the glow rushing up toward it. Before it struck the magma it realized that it had underestimated Kalifriki again.

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The Kife regarded the Valley of Frozen Time. As always, it tried to stretch the timeless moment wherein it could consider the physical prospects and some of the sequences available to it. For reasons it did not understand, the hovering process continued. It rejoiced, in that this time it saw the means whereby it might plot and manipulate events to an extent it had never achieved before. This time, not only would it be able to lay a trap for Kalifriki, but it would create one of subtlety and refinement, by a shifter, for a shifter, worthy of a shifter in all respects.

It was able to hold back the flow until almost everything was in place.

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As Kalifriki followed the Thread through the placeless time into the timeless place he was puzzled by its course thereafter, into the world to which he was about to follow the Kife for their final confrontation. It ran through the most unusual pattern he had ever beheld. It was too complicated a thing for him to analyze in detail before its force drew him to the level of events. Therefore, he would have to trust the instincts which had served him so well in the past, regarding the array only in gross, seeking the nexus of greatest menace and providing a lifeline of some sort. Here, he would have chuckled—though laughter, like wind or music, could not manifest in this place. He twisted the strand and whipped it, the hot red loop following his will, racing away from him among canyons and boulevards of his latest world-to-be. He followed…

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…Setting foot upon the rocky trail which gave way immediately beneath him. He reached for the passing ledge and caught hold, only to have it, too, yield as his weight came upon it. Then, through risen dust, he beheld the long, steep slope below, with several rocky prominences near which he soon must pass. He raised his left arm to protect his face, let his body go limp and attempted to steer the course of descent with his heels as he reflected upon the prudence of dealing with a great and distant menace while neglecting a smaller but nasty one so close at hand.

❖ ❖ ❖

When he woke he found himself in a large, canopied bed, his head aching, his mouth dry. The room was dark but daylight leaked about the edges of shutters on the far wall. He attempted to rise so as to visit the window, but the pain in his right leg told him that a bone could be broken. He cursed in Norman French, Arabic, Italian, and Greek, wiped his brow, fell to musing, and passed back to sleep.

When next he woke it was to the singing of birds and the soft sounds of another's presence in the room. Through slitted eyelids, he beheld a human-sized form advancing upon him, areas of brightness moving at its back. It halted beside the bed and he felt a cold hand upon his brow, fingertips at the pulse in his wrist. He opened his eyes.

She was blonde and dark-eyed with a small chin, her face entirely unlined, expressionless in her attention. It was difficult for him to estimate whether she was tall, short or somewhere between, in that he was uncertain as to the height of the bed. Behind her stood a gleaming simulacrum of an ape, an upright, bronze-plated chimpanzee, perfectly formed in every detail, bearing a large, dark case in its right hand. On the floor beside it stood a huge silver tortoise, a covered tray on its back, its head turning slowly from side to side.

Only for an instant did the metallic bodies cause a rush of apprehension, as he recalled his battle with the Kife in its robot form.

Then, "Do not be distressed," he heard her say, in a language close to one of the many he spoke. "We wish only to help you."

"It was a memory come to trouble me," he explained. "Is my leg broken?"

"Yes," she replied, uncovering it. He beheld an ornate swirl of black and yellow metal about his lower right leg. It seemed a work of art, such as might be displayed at the Byzantine Court. "Dr. Shong set it," she added, indicating the metal ape, who bowed.

"How long ago was this?" Kalifriki asked.

She glanced at Dr. Shong, who said, "Three days—no, three and a half," in a voice like a brassy musical instrument played low and slow.

"Thank you. How did I come to this place?"

"We found you on one of our walks," Dr. Shong said, "mixed in with the remains of a rockslide, beneath a broken trail. We brought you back here and repaired you."

"What is this place?" he asked.

"This is the home of the toymaker, Jerobee Clockman, my father," the lady told him. "I am Yolara."

The question in her eyes and voice was clear.

"I am called Kalifriki," he said.

"Are you hungry—Kalifriki?" she asked.

He nodded, licking his lips. The smell of food had become almost unbearable. "Indeed," he replied.

Dr. Shong raised him into a seated position and propped him with pillows while Yolara uncovered the tray and brought it to the bedside. She seated herself on an adjacent chair and offered him the food.

"Still warm," he observed, tasting it.

"Thank Odas," she said, gesturing toward the tortoise. "He bears a heating element in his back."

Odas met his gaze and nodded, acknowledging his thanks with, "My pleasure," rendered in a high, reedy voice, and, "Come doctor," he continued, "let us leave them to organic converse—unless we may be of some further service."

Yolara shook her head slightly and the pair departed.

When he finally paused between mouthfuls, Kalifriki nodded in the direction the pair had taken. "Your father's work?" he inquired.

"Yes," she answered.

"Ingenious, and lovely. Are there more such about?"

"Yes," she answered, staring at him so steadily as to make him uncomfortable. "You will meet more of them, by and by."

"And your father?"

"He is, at the moment, ill. Else he would have overseen your awakening and welcomed you in person."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

She looked away before replying. "It is difficult to know. He is a reticent man."

"What of your mother?"

"I never knew her. Father says that she ran away with a Gypsy musician when I was quite young."

"Have you brothers, or sisters?"

"None."

Kalifriki continued eating.

"What were you doing in these parts?" she asked after a time. "We are fairly remote from the avenues of commerce."

"Hunting," he said.

"What sort of beast?"

"It is rare. It comes from a place very far from here."

"What does it look like?"

"Anything."

"Dangerous?"

"Very."

"How is it called?"

"Kife."

She shook her head.

"I have never heard of such a creature."

"Just as well. When do you think I might get up?"

"Whenever you possess the strength. Dr. Shong says that the device you wear should protect your leg fully—though you might want a stick, for balance."

He lowered his fork.

"Yes, I would like to try…soon," he said.

Shortly, she removed the tray and drew the cover higher, for he had fallen asleep.

When he woke that afternoon, however, he attempted to get up after eating. Dr. Shong rushed to assist him. While Yolara fetched a stick, the ape helped him to dress, performing neurological tests and checking his muscle tone during their frequent pauses. Dr. Shong picked away the thread that clung to Kalifriki's wrist and tossed it aside. He did not see it drift back several moments later, settling upon his own shoulder, depending toward his hip.

They were halfway across the room when Yolara returned with the stick. Both accompanied him outside then and along the corridor to a balcony, whence he looked down upon a courtyard containing six sheep, two goats, four cows, a bull and a flock of chickens, all fashioned of metals both dull and gleaming, all seeming to browse and forage, all producing peculiar approximations of the sounds made by their flesh and blood models.

"Amazing," Kalifriki stated.

"They are merely decorative machines, not possessed of true intellect," Dr. Shong observed. "They are but child's play for the Master."

"Amazing, nevertheless," said Kalifriki.

Yolara took his arm to steady him as he turned away, heading back inside.

"We'll return you to your room now," she said.

"No," he replied, turning toward a stairwell they had passed on their way up the hall. "I must go farther."

"Not stairs. Not yet," said Dr. Shong.

"Please do as he says," she asked. "Perhaps tomorrow."

"Only if we may walk to the far end of the hallway and back."

She glanced at the metal simian, who nodded.

"Very well. But let us go slowly. Why must you push yourself so hard?"

"I must be ready to face the Kife, anywhere, anytime."

"I doubt you will find it lurking hereabouts."

"Who knows?" he replied.

That evening, Kalifriki was awakened by strains of a wild music, faint in the distance. After a time, he struggled to his feet and out into the corridor. The sounds were coming up from the stairwell. Leaning against the wall, he listened for a long while, then limped back to bed.

The following day, after breakfast, he expressed his desire for a longer walk, and Yolara dismissed Dr. Shong and led Kalifriki down the stairs. Only gradually did he come to understand the enormous size of the building through which they moved.

"Yes," she commented when he remarked upon this. "It is built upon the ruins of an ancient abbey, and over the years it has served as fortress as well as residence."

"Fascinating," he said. "Tell me, I thought that I heard music last night. Was there some sort of celebration?"

"You might call it that," she answered. "My father left his rooms for the first time in a long while, and he summoned his musicians to play for him."

"I am glad that he is feeling better," Kalifriki said. "It was an eerie and beautiful music. I would like to hear it again one day—and perhaps even be present when the musicians perform it."

"They are returned to their crypts, somewhere beneath the floor," she said. "But who knows?"

"They, too, are creations of your father?"

"I think so," she answered. "But I've never really seen them, so it is difficult to say."

They passed an aviary of bronze birds, a peculiar blue patina upon their wings, warbling, trilling, crying *kerrew* and fanning their feathers like turquoise screens. Some of them sat upon iron perches, some on nests of copper. A few of the nests contained silver eggs, while some held tiny birds, unfledged, beaks open to receive flies of foil, worms of tin. The air blurred and flashed about the singers when they moved.

In a garden in a southern courtyard she showed him a silver tree, bearing gleaming replicas of every sort of fruit he had ever seen and many he had not.

Passing up a corridor, Yolara halted before what Kalifriki at first took to be a portrait of herself, wearing a low-cut gown of black satin, a large emerald pendant in the shape of a ship riding the swells of her breasts. But upon closer regard the woman seemed more mature—

"My mother," Yolara said.

"Lovely," Kalifriki replied, "also."

At the end of the corridor was a red metal top as large as himself, spinning with a sad note, balanced upon the point of a dagger. Yolara told him that the top would rotate for ninety-nine years undisturbed.

She stated this so seriously that Kalifriki chuckled.

"I have not heard you laugh nor seen you smile," he said, "the entire time I've been here."

"These things are not as fresh to me as they are to you," she replied. "I see them every day."

He nodded.

"Of course," he said.

Then she smiled. She squeezed his hand with a surprisingly firm grip.

The following day they went riding great horned horses of metal—he, mounted upon a purple stallion; she, a green mare. They sat for a long while on a hilltop, regarding the valley, the mountains and the fortress of Jerobee Clockman. He told her somewhat of himself and her fascination seemed genuine, well beyond the point of courtesy. She seemed awkward when he finally kissed her, and it was not until the slow ride back that she told him she knew no humans other than her father, having met only an occasional merchant, minstrel, or messenger for brief spans of time.

"That seems a very odd way to live," he commented.

"Really?" she replied. "I was beginning to suspect this from reading books in the library. But since they are fiction to begin with, I could never be certain what parts are real."

"Your father seems a peculiar man," said Kalifriki. "I would like to meet him."

"I am not sure he is entirely recovered," she said. "He has been avoiding me somewhat." Riding farther, she added, "I *would* like to see more of the world than this place."

That night when Kalifriki heard the music again he made his way slowly and quietly down the stairs. He paused just outside the hall from which the skirls and wailings flowed. Carefully, then, he lowered himself to his belly and inched forward, so that he could peer around the corner of the entranceway, his eyes but a few centimeters above the floor.

He beheld a metallic quartet with the blasted forms and visages of fallen angels. They were all of them crippled, their gray, gold, and silver bodies scorched, faces pocked, brows antlered or simply horned. Broken bat-wings hung like black gossamer from their shoulders. There were two fiddlers, one piper and one who performed on a rack of crystal bells. The music was stirring, chaotic, mesmerizing, yet somehow cold as a north wind on a winter's night. It was hardly human music, and Kalifriki found himself wondering whether the metal demons composed their own tunes. Behind them, in the floor, were five grave-sized openings, the four surrounding the fifth. Seated before them in a large leather chair was a white-haired fat man whose features Kalifriki could not see, for the man had steepled his fingers and held them before his face. This did, however, draw his attention to a large sapphire ring upon the man's right hand.

When the piece was ended the creatures grew still. The man rose to his feet and took hold of a slim red lance leaning against the nearest wall. Taking several steps forward, he struck its butt upon a crescent-shaped flagstone. Immediately, the musicians swiveled in place, approached their crypts, and descended into them. When they were below the level of the floor, stone covers slid into place, concealing all traces of their existence.

The man placed the lance upon a pair of pegs on the wall to his left, then crossed the room and went out of a door at its far end. Cautiously, Kalifriki rose, entered and moved through. At the far door, he saw the form of the man reach the end of a hallway and begin mounting a stair, which he knew from an earlier walk to lead to the building's highest tower. He waited for a long while before taking down the lance. When he struck its butt against the curved stone, the floor opened and he stared down into the crypts.

The demon musicians emerged and stood, raising their instruments, preparing to play. But Kalifriki had already seen all that he cared to. He struck the stone once more and the quartet retired again. He restored the lance to its pegs and departed the hall.

For a long time he wandered the dim corridors, lost in thought. When, at length, he passed a lighted room and saw it to be a library with Dr. Shong seated within, reading, he paused.

"Kalifriki," said the doctor, "what is the matter?"

"I think better when I pace."

"You are still recovering and sleep will serve you more than thought."

"That is not how I am built. When I am troubled I pace and think."

"I was not aware of this engineering peculiarity. Tell me your trouble and perhaps I can help you."

"I have not yet met my host. Is Jerobee Clockman aware of my presence here?"

"Yes. I report to him every day."

"Oh. Has he any special orders concerning me?"

"To treat your injury, to feed you and to see that you are extended every courtesy."

"Has he no desire to meet me in person?"

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, but I must remind you that he has not been well himself of late. He is sufficiently improved now, however, that he will be inviting you to dine with him tomorrow."

"Is it true that Yolara's mother ran off with a musician?" Kalifriki asked.

"So I have heard. I was not present in those days. I was created after Yolara was grown."

"Thank you, doctor," Kalifriki said, "and good night."

He limped on up to the hallway. When he turned the corner the limp vanished. Farther along the corridor he seated himself upon a bench, rolled up his trouser leg and removed the elaborate brace he wore. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Then he shifted his weight. Then he smiled.

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Later that evening Yolara heard a scratching upon her door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Kalifriki. I want to talk to you."

"A moment," she said.

She opened the door. He noted she was still fully clothed in the garments she had worn that day.

"How did you know which door was mine?" she asked him.

"I stepped outside and looked up," he replied. "This was the only room with a light on—apart from mine and the library, where I left Dr. Shong. And I know your father's rooms are in the North Tower."

She granted him her second smile.

"Ingenious," she stated. "What is it you wish to talk about?"

"First, a question—if I may."

"Surely." She stepped aside and held the door wide. "Please come in."

"Thank you."

He took the chair she offered him, then said, "When I awoke several days ago, Dr. Shong told me that I had been found at the scene of my accident three and a half days earlier."

She nodded.

"Were you present when I was discovered?"

"No," she answered. "I heard of you later."

"He used the pronoun 'we,' so I assumed that you were included. Do you know who else was with him?"

She shook her head.

"One of the other simulacra, most likely," she said. "But it might also have been my father. I think not, though, because of his illness."

"Yolara," he said, "something is wrong in this place. I feel that we are both in great danger. You have said that you would like to leave. Very well. Get some things together and I'll take you away, right now, tonight."

Her eyes widened.

"This is so abrupt! I would have to tell my father! I—"

"No!" he said. "He is the one I fear. I believe he is mad, Yolara—and very dangerous."

"He would never harm me," she said.

"I would not be too certain. You resemble your mother strongly, if that portrait be true. In his madness he may one day confuse you with her memory. Then you would be in danger."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You must tell me why you say this."

"I believe that he found your mother after her affair with the Gypsy, and that he killed her."

"How can you say that?"

"I've been to the hall where he keeps his demon quartet. I have opened their crypts—and a fifth one about which they assemble to play. In that fifth one is a skeleton. About its neck is the chain bearing the emerald chip which she is wearing in the painting."

"No! I do not believe it!"

"I am sorry."

"I must see this for myself."

"I would rather you did not."

"To make a charge like that and ask me to accept it on faith is too much," she stated. "Come! It would not be as bad as you may think, for my mother is a stranger to me. I would see this crypt."

"Very well."

He rose to his feet and they passed outside. Reaching into a shadowy alcove, he produced a length of bright steel which he kept in his right hand as he led the way to the stairs.

"Where did you get the sword?" she asked.

"Borrowed it from a suit of armor downstairs."

"My father is a sick old man. It is hardly necessary to arm yourself against him."

"Then no harm is done," he replied.

"There is even more to this," she said, "isn't there?"

"We shall see," he answered.

When they came to the hall he had visited earlier, Kalifriki took the red lance down from the wall.

"Stand here," he directed, leading her to a place near the middle crypt, and he stepped back and smote the crescent stone with the lance's butt.

The stones slid back and he hurried to her side. Her scream was not caused by the demons which rose to surround them, however. Looking down into the crypt, Kalifriki beheld the body of a fat, white-haired man whose head had been twisted around so that it faced completely to the rear. The body lay in the embrace of the ancient skeleton from whose neck the emerald chip depended.

"Who did this?" she asked.

"I don't know," Kalifriki said. "He was not there earlier. I don't understand. I—"

He knelt suddenly and reached down into the crypt. He raised the man's right hand.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A ring with a blue stone in it," he said. "He was wearing it earlier this evening. Now he is not."

"His signet," she said. "His seal as Master Toymaker. He would never part with it willingly."

Just then the demon quartet began to play and words became impossible. Lowering the toymaker's hand, Kalifriki picked up the red lance which he had laid aside. He rose to his feet.

He passed between the crippled demons, and when he came to the crescent stone he struck it with the lance. Immediately, the music died. The performers retired to their crypts. The crypts began to close.

"Now do you at least believe that there is danger?" he said.

"Yes," she replied. "But—"

"Indeed there is," said the fat, white-haired man who entered through the far doorway, a flash of blue upon his right hand. "I heard your scream."

"Father's simulacrum," she said. "He'd often considered making one. I didn't know that he had. It's killed him and taken his place!"

The fat man smiled and advanced.

"Excellent," he said. "Hard to put one over on you, isn't it?"

"Where's its weakest spot?" Kalifriki asked her, raising the blade.

"Slightly below the navel," she answered, and he lowered the point of the weapon.

"Really," the simulacrum said, "beneath this guise of flesh you will find that you face metal against metal. It would take a good arm and a good blade to puncture me."

Kalifriki smiled.

"Shall we find out?" he asked.

The simulacrum halted.

"No, let's not," it replied. "It seems an awful waste of talent."

Its gaze moved past them then. Kalifriki turned his head, to see Dr. Shong enter through the other door.

"Doctor!" Yolara cried. "He's killed Father and taken his place!"

"I know," the ape replied, and she stared as he grinned. "He had an offer he couldn't refuse."

"My leg," Kalifriki said, "is not broken. I believe that it was, but it is healed now. That would have taken considerably longer than the few days you said it had been. I think I've been here for several weeks, that you've kept me drugged—"

"Very astute," Dr. Shong observed. "Also, correct. We had a special request of the late Jerobee Clockman. He did not finish the final adjustments until only a little while ago."

"And then you killed him!" Yolara cried.

"Just so," said the simian, nodding, "though his simulacrum did the actual physical business. But it is *lèse majesté* to call us killers in the presence of assassin royalty such as your guest. Isn't that right, Kalifriki?"

"Come closer, ape," he said.

"No. You seem to have figured out everything but why. So take the final step and tell me: what was Clockman's last creation—the thing he assembled that long while you slept?"

"I…I don't know," Kalifriki said.

"Come in!" Dr. Shong called out.

Kalifriki watched as his own double entered the room, a sword in its hand.

"Built according to your specifications," the ape stated. "Considerably stronger, though."

"I thought the Kife had fled."

His doppelgänger bowed.

"You were incorrect," it told him.

Kalifriki slammed the butt of the lance against the crescent stone, Yolara cried "Killer!" and rushed toward the portly simulacrum, while the doppelgänger advanced upon Kalifriki, the point of its blade describing a small circle in the air.

"By all means, let us dance," said his double, smiling, as the musicians took up their instruments and tuned them. The ape laughed, and Yolara cried out as she was thrown across the room to strike her head upon the hearthstone.

Snarling, Kalifriki turned away from his advancing double and, with a quick leap and an even quicker lunge, drove his blade into the simulacrum of Jerobee Clockman with such force that its point passed through its abdomen and protruded from its lower back. The weapon was wrenched from Kalifriki's grip as the figure suddenly raised both arms to shoulder height, extending them out to the sides, twisted its head into a bizarre position, and began the execution of a series of dance steps. With this, a small ratcheting noise commenced in the vicinity of its midsection.

Turning then, swinging the red lance in a circle, Kalifriki succeeded in parrying his double's attack. Retreating, the music swirling wildly about him, he ventured a glance at Yolara, discovering that she still had not moved. The glance almost cost him an ear, but he parried the thrust and riposted with a double-handed blow of the lance which would have cracked a human's ribs but only slowed the simulacrum for a moment. During that moment, however, he struck it between the eyes with the butt of the weapon and, reversing it with a spin, jabbed for the abdomen with the lance's point. The attack was parried, though; and seeming to shake off all its effects, his doppelgänger pressed him again. In the distance, he heard Dr. Shong chuckle.

Then he began to retreat once again, turning, passing behind the simulacrum of Jerobee Clockman—which was now dancing in extreme slow motion and emitting periodic clanging sounds. As it shifted its weight from left foot to right, he kicked it hard and it toppled in that direction, falling directly in the path of the double. Laughing, the doppelgänger leapt over the twitching figure to continue its attack.

Kalifriki passed among the musicians then, dodging the fiddlers' bows, side-stepping to avoid collision with the bell rack. And his double came on, stamping, thrusting, parrying and riposting. When he reached the position toward which he had been headed, Kalifriki pretended to stumble.

Predictably, the other attacked. Continuing his drop onto one knee and turning his body, Kalifriki executed a downward, rowing stroke with the lance which caught the simulacrum behind the knees, sweeping it off-balance. Springing to his feet then, Kalifriki struck it between the shoulder blades and rushed away as it toppled into the opened crypt.

Slamming the butt of the lance against the crescent stone silenced the musicians immediately, and they tucked away their instruments, retreating toward their own crypts. Rushing among them, Kalifriki raised the lance once more to club down his doppelgänger, should it try to emerge before the crypt sealed itself. It looked up and met his gaze.

"Fool!" it cried. "You guard me while the Kife flees!"

"Dr. Shong?" Kalifriki exclaimed, suddenly knowing it to be true.

Whirling, he hurled the lance at the running ape form, just as the crypt's lid slid shut above the simulacrum. The red shaft struck the hurrying figure's left shoulder with a terrific clang as it was about to cross the threshold of the nearer door. The impact turned it completely around. Miraculously, the ape did not fall, but teetered a moment, regained its balance, then rushed across the room toward the fireplace, left arm hanging useless.

Arriving before Kalifriki could take more than three paces, Dr. Shong knelt and reached, right hand fastening about Yolara's throat.

"Stop!" cried the ape. "I can decapitate her with a single movement! And I will if you come any nearer!"

Kalifriki halted, regarding the smear of blood on her temple.

"There was a time when I thought *she* might be a simulacrum," he said.

"I had toyed with the notion," said the other, "of replacing her with a version designed to kill you after you'd fallen in love with it. But I lack sufficient knowledge of human emotions. I was afraid it might take too long, or that it might not happen. Still, it would have been a delightful way of managing it."

Kalifriki nodded.

"What now?" he asked. "We seem stalemated here. Except that she does not appear to be breathing. If this is true, your threat is meaningless."

He began to take another step.

"Stop!" The Kife rose slowly, clasping her to its breast with forearm and elbow, its hand still at her throat. "I say she still lives. if you wish to gamble with her life, come ahead."

Kalifriki paused, his eyes narrowing. In the dim light, he saw the Thread, upon the shoulder and waist of the simulacrum. Slowly, he raised his left arm. The Thread was also wrapped about his wrist. It extended back over his left shoulder. It extended forward. It joined with the segment of itself which hung upon the metal ape. It passed beyond, out of the door of the room. As Kalifriki flexed his fingers, it grew taut. As he continued the movement, the Kife turned its head, bewildered, as if looking for something in several directions. When Kalifriki closed his hand into a fist, the segments of Thread which had been looped about the Kife vanished from sight, slicing their ways into the metal body.

Moments later, the simulacrum had collapsed, falling to the floor in three pieces. It had been decapitated and the torso separated from the legs at the waist. Yolara lay sprawled across its mid-section, and its head rolled toward Kalifriki.

As Kalifriki stepped past it, it addressed him: "I lied. She is not breathing."

Kalifriki halted, picked up the head and drew back his arm to hurl it against the nearest wall.

"But she may breathe again," it said, lips twisting into a smile, "if you but use your head."

"What do you mean?" Kalifriki asked. "Talk!"

"That which I stole from the Old Man of the Mountain—the Elixir of Life—it would revive her."

"Where is it?"

"I will tell you, in return for your promise that you will not destroy me."

Kalifriki turned the face away from his so that the Kife would not see him smile.

"Very well," he answered. "You have my word. Where is it?"

"Hidden among the gold and silver fruit in the bowl on the table beside the far door."

Kalifriki crossed the room, searched the bowl.

"Yes," he said at last, removing the small vial.

He unstoppered it and sniffed it. He placed his finger over the bottle's mouth, inverted it, returned it to an upright position. He placed upon his tongue the single droplet which clung to his fingertip.

"It is odorless and tasteless," he observed, "and I feel nothing. Are you certain this is not some trick?"

"Do not waste it, fool! It takes only a drop!"

"Very well. You had better be telling the truth."

He returned to Yolara's side and drew downwards upon her chin to open her mouth. Then he removed another drop from the vial and placed it upon her tongue.

Moments later she drew a deep breath and sighed. Shortly thereafter, her eyelids fluttered and opened.

"What," she asked him, "has happened?"

"It is over," he said, raising her and holding her. "We live, and my job is finished."

"What was your job?" she inquired.

"To recover this vial," he explained, "and to bring back the head of its thief."

The brazen ape-head began to wail.

"You have tricked me!" it cried.

"You have tricked yourself," he replied, stoppering the bottle and pocketing it, helping Yolara to her feet.

"You are in charge here now," he told her. "If the memories are too bad for you, come with me and I will try to give you some better ones."

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Now, as he led her through the Valley of Frozen Time, Kalifriki halted in a place that was sculpture, painting, map. He squeezed Yolara's arm and gestured at the incredible prospect which lay before them.

She smiled and nodded, just as the head of the Kife, which Kalifriki bore in his left hand, opened its mouth and bit him. He would have cursed, save that this was not a place of words (nor music, nor wind). He dropped the head, which rolled away, and he raised his hand to his mouth. The Kife's head fell into a crevice, where it rolled a considerable distance before coming to rest in precarious balance at the top of another incline, its position masked in darkest shadow. Search though he did, Kalifriki never found it, and he had to settle for only half of his pay, for the Old Man of Alamut is a harsh taskmaster. Still, this was not an inconsiderable amount, and with it he took Yolara on an amazing odyssey, to Byzantium, Venice, Cathay—but that is another story. The while, the Kife went mad of contemplating the turnings of fate; its brazen head fell from the ledge when it opened its jaw to scream, though this was not a place of screaming (nor music, nor wind); and it rolled the side-beside slopes down to a lane near Oxford, where a Franciscan named Roger Bacon found it. That, too, is another story. The Thread is always arriving and departing. It may wander anywhere and need not have an end.

A Word from Zelazny

"[This story] was written at the request of Diana Wynne Jones (to whom I owe special thanks for introducing me to Gorky's autobiography, as well as for writing so many fine works of her own). In variation/imitation terms, I was playing with some of the gimmickry and feelings from E. T. A. Hoffman's tales when I wrote this piece for her collection *Hidden Turnings* [Hoffman's most famous story was "Nutcracker and Mouse King," which Tchaikovsky adapted into the ballet *The Nutcracker*]. And yes, I was winging it most of the way through, rather than working from a completed mental outline."[1]

"With some of my stories a character such as Dilvish, Kalifriki, Mara or Conrad comes in out of the night, takes my attention hostage, and waits. Circumstances then suggest, events coalesce, and the story flows like a shadow. Generally, tales such as these are longer pieces; novels, even. Once I've seen their shapes, they exist as ghosts for me till I've pinned them to paper."[2]

Kalifriki returns in "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love."

Notes

Orpheus in Greek mythology was married to Eurydice, who was bitten by a serpent and died. Orpheus sang so mournfully that he made the gods weep and counsel him. He traveled to the underworld where his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone and made the Furies weep. Eurydice was then allowed to return with him to the world of the living, on the stipulation that he precede her and not look back until he reached the upper world. Anxious to know if she truly followed him, he turned around, and she vanished forever.

The quote that begins the story is attributed to Orpheus. The poem refers to Dionysus, Zeus's son, who was distracted by toys while the evil Titans approached. The Titans tore him to pieces, boiled his flesh, and ate of it before Zeus stopped them and allowed Dionysus to be reborn. Like Dionysus, the Kife can regenerate.

Lèse majesté is an affront to the sovereign. A **doppelgänger** is a person's ghostly double. Apocryphal tales suggest that Franciscan friar **Roger Bacon** created a **brazen** talking **head** which could answer any question put to it.

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[1] *Gone to Earth*, Pulphouse 1991.

[2] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

THE DEADLIEST GAME

Drabble II: Double Century, eds. Rob Meades and David B. Wake, Beccon Publications 1990.

Uncle Dudley sat in his study, gaze fixed on the blank screen of the set which hung on the wall before him. A rack of rifles hung to his right, flanked by the heads of Cape Buffalo and lion.

"Which was the deadliest of all?" I asked him.

He nodded directly ahead.

I studied the machine closely, saw the silvery ears laid flat along its brow as if it had been attacking when it took the hit. 30.06, I judged.

"Extinct now, aren't they?" I asked.

He fingered the scar on his cheek and nodded.

"Good thing, too," he said.

Notes

This short-short story was requested for an anthology in which every piece had to be exactly 100 words (a century) in length, not a syllable more, not a letter less (excluding the title). This nonsense rule about syllables and letters is deliberate because the *Drabble Project* was inspired by the humor of Monty Python.[1] *Monty Python's Big Red Book* defines "drabble" as "a word game for 2 to 4 players. The four players sit from left to right and the first person to write a novel wins."[2] To recreate this game in the real world a "drabble" came to mean a story of one hundred words.

The deadliest game has numerous meanings (including hunting humans for sport), and this case has the Zelazny twist. **Cape Buffalo** or African Buffalo weigh 900 kg or more and can defend themselves against lions.

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[1] The Drabble Rules: The One Hundred Word Variant, by Dave B. Wake, http://www.meades.org/drabble.html

[2] *Monty Python's Big Red Book*, Terry Gilliam *et al.*, Eyre Methuen 1972.

NAMELESS GRAVE BY A NAMELESS SEA, PROBABLY GREEK

To Spin Is Miracle Cat, Underwood-Miller 1981.
Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky.*

Bright air by brighter honor signed,
and wounded things, all left behind,
mean nothing in a travesty of sleep.

The arrows of Thanatos miss no man: Weep.

Notes

Thanatos is the personification of death in Greek mythology, the equivalent of today's Grim Reaper.

24 VIEWS OF MT. FUJI, BY HOKUSAI

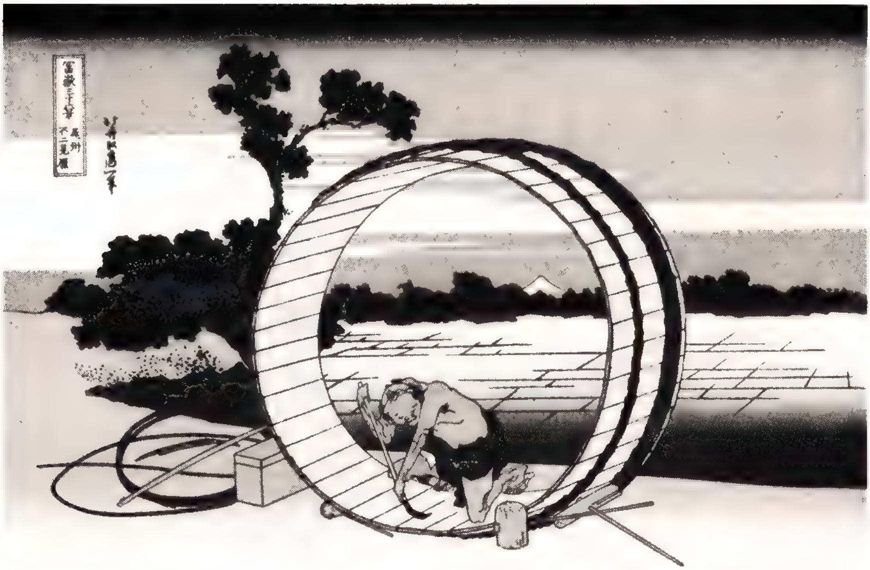
Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, July 1985.
Hugo Award 1986 (novella); Nebula nominee 1986 (novella); #5 on 1986 Locus poll (novella).

1. MT. FUJI FROM OWARI

Kit lives, though he is buried not far from here; and I am dead, though I watch the days-end light pinking cloudstreaks above the mountain in the distance, a tree in the foreground for suitable contrast. The old barrel man is dust; his cask, too, I daresay. Kit said that he loved me and I said I loved him. We were both telling the truth. But love can mean many things. It can be an instrument of aggression or a function of disease.

My name is Mari. I do not know whether my life will fit the forms I move to meet on this pilgrimage. Nor death. Not that tidiness becomes me. So begin anywhere. Either arcing of the circle, like that vanished barrel's hoop, should lead to the same place. I have come to kill. I bear the hidden death, to cast against the secret life. Both are intolerable. I have weighed them. If I were an outsider I do not know which I would choose. But I am here, me, Mari, following the magic footsteps. Each moment is entire, though each requires its past. I do not understand causes, only sequences. And I am long weary of reality reversal games. Things will have to grow clearer with each successive layer of my journey, and like the delicate play of light upon my magic mountain they must change. I must die a little and live a little each moment.

I begin here because we lived near here. I visited the place earlier. It is, of course, changed. I recall his hand upon my arm, his



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

sometime smiling face, his stacks of books, the cold, flat eye of his computer terminal, his hands again, positioned in meditation, his smile different then. Distant and near. His hands, upon me. The power of his programs, to crack codes, to build them. His hands. Deadly. Who would have thought he would surrender those rapid striking weapons, delicate instruments, twisters of bodies? Or myself? Paths…Hands…

I have come back. It is all. I do not know whether it is enough.

The old barrel maker within the hoop of his labor…Half full, half empty, half active, half passive…Shall I make a yin-yang of that famous print? Shall I let it stand for Kit and myself? Shall I view it as the great Zero? Or as infinity? Or is all of this too obvious? One of those observations best left unstated? I am not always subtle. Let it stand. Fuji stands within it. And is it not Fuji one must climb to give an accounting of one's life before God or the gods?

I have no intention of climbing Fuji and accounting for myself, to God or to anything else. Only the insecure and the uncertain require justification. I do what I must. If the deities have any questions they can come down from Fuji and ask me. Otherwise, this is the closest commerce between us. That which transcends should only be admired from afar.

Indeed. I of all people should know this. I, who have tasted transcendence. I know, too, that death is the only god who comes when you call.

Traditionally, the *henro*—the pilgrim—would dress all in white. I do not. White does not become me, and my pilgrimage is a private thing, a secret thing, for so long as I can keep it so. I wear a red blouse today and a light khaki jacket and slacks, tough leather hiking shoes; I have bound my hair; a pack on my back holds my belongings. I do carry a stick, however, partly for the purpose of support, which I require upon occasion; partly, too, as a weapon should the need arise. I am adept at its use in both these functions. A staff is also said to symbolize one's faith in a pilgrimage. Faith is beyond me. I will settle for hope.

In the pocket of my jacket is a small book containing reproductions of twenty-four of Hokusai's forty-six prints of Mt. Fuji. It was a gift, long ago. Tradition also stands against a pilgrim's traveling alone, for practical purposes of safety as well as for companionship. The spirit of Hokusai, then, is my companion, for surely it resides in the places I would visit if it resides anywhere. There is no other companion I would desire at the moment, and what is a Japanese drama without a ghost?

Having viewed this scene and thought my thoughts and felt my feelings, I have begun. I have lived a little, I have died a little. My way will not be entirely on foot. But much of it will be. There are certain things I must avoid in this journey of greetings and farewells. Simplicity is my cloak of darkness, and perhaps the walking will be good for me.

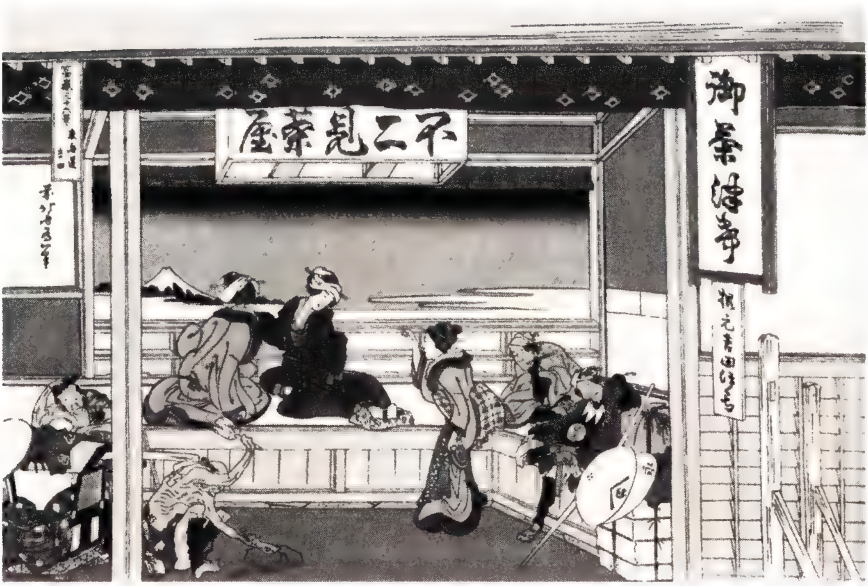
I must watch my health.

2. MT. FUJI FROM A TEAHOUSE AT YOSHIDA

I study the print: A soft blueness to the dawn sky, Fuji to the left, seen through the teahouse window by two women; other bowed, drowsing figures like puppets on a shelf…

It is not this way here, now. They are gone, like the barrel-maker—the people, the teahouse, that dawn. Only the mountain and the print remain of the moment. But that is enough.

I sit in the dining room of the hostel where I spent the night, my breakfast eaten, a pot of tea before me. There are other diners present, but none near me. I chose this table because of the window's



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

view, which approximates that of the print. Hokusai, my silent companion, may be smiling. The weather was sufficiently clement for me to have camped again last night, but I am deadly serious in my pilgrimage to vanished scenes in this life-death journey I have undertaken. It is partly a matter of seeking and partly a matter of waiting. It is quite possible that it may be cut short at any time. I hope not, but the patterns of life have seldom corresponded to my hopes—or, for that matter, to logic, desire, emptiness, or any patterns of my own against which I have measured them.

All of this is not the proper attitude and occupation for a fresh day. I will drink my tea and regard the mountain. The sky changes even as I watch…

Changes…I must be careful on departing this place. There are precincts to be avoided, precautions to be taken. I have worked out all of my movements—from putting down the cup, rising, turning, recovering my gear, walking—until I am back in the country again. I must still make patterns, for the world is a number-line, everywhere dense. I am taking a small chance in being here.

I am not so tired as I had thought I would be from all yesterday's walking, and I take this as a good sign. I have tried to keep in decent shape, despite everything. A scroll hangs on the wall to my right depicting a tiger, and I want this, too, for a good omen. I was born in the Year of the Tiger, and the strength and silent movements of the big striped cat are what I most need. I drink to you, Shere Khan, cat who walks by himself. We must be hard at the right time, soft at the proper moment. Timing…

We'd an almost telepathic bond to begin with, Kit and I. It drew us to each other, grew stronger in our years together. Empathy, proximity, meditation…Love? Then love can be a weapon. Spin its coin and it comes up yang.

Burn bright, Shere Khan, in the jungle of the heart. This time we are the hunter. Timing is all—and *suki* , the opening…

I watch the changes of the sky until a uniform brightness is achieved, holds steady. I finish my tea. I rise and fetch my gear, don my backpack, take up my staff. I head for the short hall which leads to a side door.

"Madam! Madam!"

It is one of the place's employees, a small man with a startled expression.

"Yes?"

He nods at my pack.

"You are leaving us?"

"I am."

"You have not checked out."

"I have left payment for my room in an envelope on the dresser. It says 'cashier' on it. I learned the proper amount last night."

"You must check out at the desk."

"I did not check in at the desk. I am not checking out at the desk. If you wish, I will accompany you back to the room, to show you where I left the payment."

"I am sorry, but it must be done with the cashier."

"I am sorry also, but I have left payment and I will not go to the desk."

"It is irregular. I will have to call the manager."

I sigh.

"No," I say. "I do not want that. I will go to the lobby and handle the checking out as I did the checking in."

I retrace my steps. I turn left toward the lobby.

"Your money," he says. "If you left it in the room you must get it and bring it."

I shake my head.

"I left the key, also."

I enter the lobby. I go to the chair in the corner, the one farthest from the work area. I seat myself.

The small man has followed me.

"Would you tell them at the desk that I wish to check out?" I ask him.

"Your room number…?"

"Seventeen."

He bows slightly and crosses to the counter. He speaks with a woman, who glances at me several times. I cannot hear their words. Finally, he takes a key from her and departs. The woman smiles at me.

"He will bring the key and the money from your room," she says. "Have you enjoyed your stay?"

"Yes," I answer. "If it is being taken care of, I will leave now."

I begin to rise.

"Please wait," she says, "until the paperwork is done and I have given you your receipt."

"I do not want the receipt."

"I am required to give it to you."

I sit back down. I hold my staff between my knees. I clasp it with both hands. If I try to leave now she will probably call the manager. I do not wish to attract even more attention to myself. I wait. I control my breathing. I empty my mind.

After a time the man returns. He hands her the key and the envelope. She shuffles papers. She inserts a form into a machine. There is a brief stutter of keys. She withdraws the form and regards it. She counts the money in my envelope.

"You have the exact amount, Mrs. Smith. Here is your receipt."

She peels the top sheet from the bill.

There comes a peculiar feeling in the air, as if a lightning stroke had fallen here but a second ago. I rise quickly to my feet.

"Tell me," I say, "is this place a private business or part of a chain?"

I am moving forward by then, for I know the answer before she says it. The feeling is intensified, localized.

"We are a chain," she replies, looking about uneasily.

"With central bookkeeping?"

"Yes."

Behind the special place where the senses come together to describe reality I see the form of a batlike epigon taking shape beside her. She already feels its presence but does not understand. My way is *mo chih ch'u* , as the Chinese say—immediate action, without thought or hesitation—as I reach the desk, place my staff upon it at the proper angle, lean forward as if to take my receipt and nudge the staff so that it slides and falls, passing over the countertop, its small metal tip coming to rest against the housing of the computer terminal. Immediately, the overhead lights go out. The epigon collapses and dissipates.

"Power failure," I observe, raising my staff and turning away. "Good day."

I hear her calling for a boy to check the circuit box.

I make my way out of the lobby and visit a rest room, where I take a pill, just in case. Then I return to the short hall, traverse it, and depart the building. I had assumed it would happen sooner or later, so I was not unprepared. The microminiature circuitry within my staff was sufficient to the occasion, and while I would rather it had occurred later, perhaps it was good for me that it happened when it did. I feel more alive, more alert from this demonstration of danger. This feeling, this knowledge, will be of use to me.

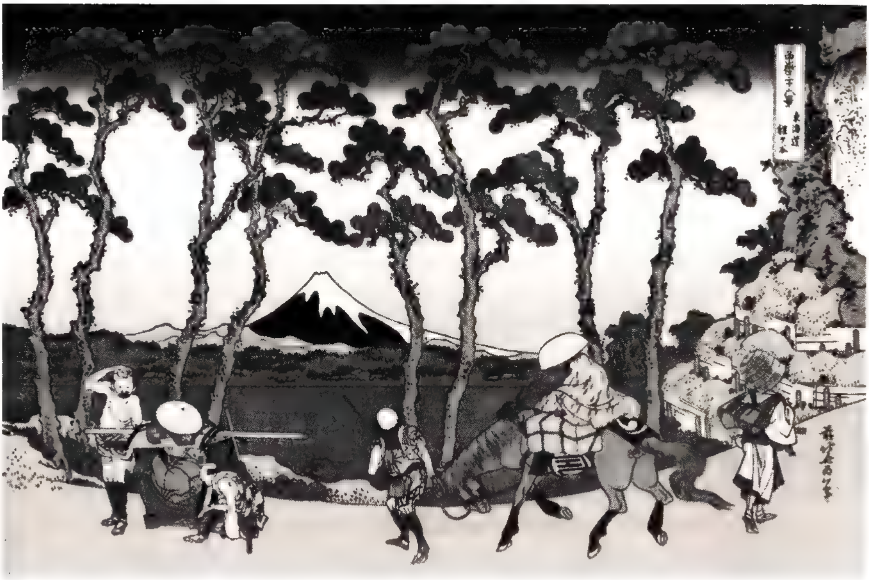
And it did not reach me. It accomplished nothing. The basic situation is unchanged. I am happy to have benefited at so small a price.

Still, I wish to be away and into the countryside, where I am strong and the other is weak.

I walk into the fresh day, a piece of my life upon the breakfast moment's mountain.

3. MT. FUJI FROM HODOGAYA

I find a place of twisted pines along the Tōkaidō, and I halt to view Fuji through them. The travelers who pass in the first hour or so of my vigil do not look like Hokusai's, but no matter. The horse, the sedan chair, the blue garments, the big hats—faded into the past, traveling forever on the print now. Merchant or nobleman, thief or servant—I choose to look upon them as pilgrims of one sort or another, if only into, through, and out of life. My morbidity, I hasten to add, is excusable, in that I have required additional medication. I am stable now, however, and do not know whether medication or meditation is responsible for my heightened



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

perception of the subtleties of the light. Fuji seems almost to move within my gazing.

Pilgrims…I am minded of the wanderings of Matsuo Bashō, who said that all of us are travelers every minute of our lives. I recall also his reflections upon the lagoons of Matsushima and Kisagata—the former possessed of a cheerful beauty, the latter the beauty of a weeping countenance. I think upon the complexion and expressions of Fuji and I am baffled. Sorrow? Penance? Joy? Exaltation? They merge and shift. I lack the genius of Bashō to capture them all in a single character. And even he…I do not know. Like speaks to like, but speech must cross a gulf. Fascination always includes some lack of understanding. It is enough for this moment, to view.

Pilgrims…I think, too, of Chaucer as I regard the print. His travelers had a good time. They told each other dirty stories and romances and tales with morals attached. They ate and they drank and they kidded each other. Canterbury was their Fuji. They had a party along the way. The book ends before they arrive. Fitting.

I am not a humorless bitch. It may be that Fuji is really laughing at me. If so, I would like very much to join in. I really do not enjoy moods such as this, and a bit of meditation interruptus would be welcome if only the proper object would present itself. Life's soberer mysteries cannot be working at top speed all the time. If they can take a break, I want one, too. Tomorrow, perhaps…

Damn! My presence must at least be suspected, or the epigon would not have come. Still, I have been very careful. A suspicion is not a certainty, and I am sure that my action was sufficiently prompt to preclude confirmation. My present location is beyond reach as well as knowledge. I have retreated into Hokusai's art.

I could have lived out the rest of my days upon Oregon's quiet coast. The place was not without its satisfactions. But I believe it was Rilke who said that life is a game we must begin playing before we have learned the rules. Do we ever? Are there really rules?

Perhaps I read too many poets.

But something that seems a rule to me requires I make this effort. Justice, duty, vengeance, defense—must I weigh each of these and assign it a percentage of that which moves me? I am here because I am here, because I am following rules—whatever they may be. My understanding is limited to sequences.

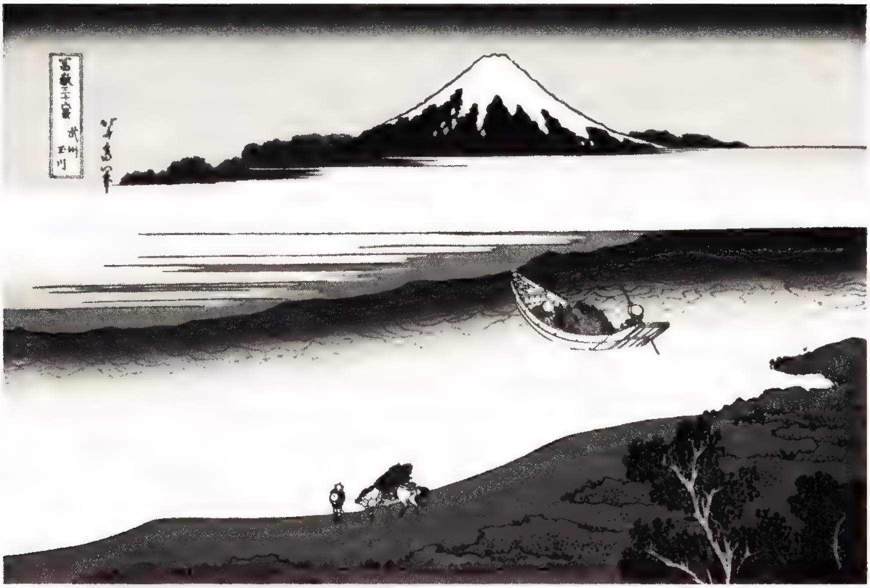
His is not. He could always make the intuitive leap. Kit was a scholar, a scientist, a poet. Such riches. I am smaller in all ways.

Kokuzo, guardian of those born in the Year of the Tiger, break this mood. I do not want it. It is not me. Let it be an irritation of old lesions, even a renewal of the demyelination. But do not let it be me. And end it soon. I am sick in my heart and my reasons are good ones. Give me the strength to detach myself from them, Catcher in the Bamboo, lord of those who wear the stripes. Take away the bleakness, gather me together, inform me with strength. Balance me.

I watch the play of light. From somewhere I hear the singing of children. After a time a gentle rain begins to fall. I don my poncho and continue to watch. I am very weary, but I want to see Fuji emerge from the fog which has risen. I sip water and a bit of brandy. Only the barest outline remains. Fuji is become a ghost mountain within a Taoist painting. I wait until the sky begins to darken. I know that the mountain will not come to me again this day, and I must find a dry place to sleep. These must be my lessons from Hodogaya: Tend to the present. Do not try to polish ideals. Have sense enough to get in out of the rain.

I stumble off through a small wood. A shed, a barn, a garage… Anything that stands between me and the sky will do.

After a time I find such a place. No god addresses my dreaming.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

4. MT. FUJI FROM THE TAMAGAWA

I compare the print with the reality. Not bad this time. The horse and the man are absent from the shore, but there is a small boat out on the water. Not the same sort of boat, to be sure, and I cannot tell whether it bears firewood, but it will suffice. I would be surprised to find perfect congruence. The boat is moving away from me. The pink of the dawn sky is reflected upon the water's farther reaches and from the snowstreaks on Fuji's dark shoulder. The boatman in the print is poling his way outward. Charon? No, I am more cheerful today than I was at Hodogaya. Too small a vessel for the *Narrenschiff*, too slow for the *Flying Dutchman*. "La navicella." Yes. "*La navicella del mio ingegno*"—"the little bark of my wit" on which Dante hoisted sail for that second realm, Purgatory. Fuji then…Perhaps so. The hells beneath, the heavens above, Fuji between—way station, stopover, terminal. A decent metaphor for a pilgrim who could use a purge. Appropriate. For it contains the fire and the earth as well as the air, as I gaze across the water. Transition, change. I am passing.

The serenity is broken and my reverie ended as a light airplane, yellow in color, swoops out over the water from someplace to my left. Moments later the insectlike buzzing of its single engine reaches me. It loses altitude quickly, skimming low over the water, then turns and traces its way back, this time swinging in above the shoreline. As it nears the point where it will pass closest to me, I detect a flash of reflected light within the cockpit. A lens? If it is, it is too late to cover myself against its questing eye. My hand dips into my breast pocket and withdraws a small gray cylinder of my own. I flick off its endcaps with my thumbnail as I raise it to peer through the eyepiece. A moment to locate the target, another to focus…

The pilot is a man, and as the plane banks away I catch only his unfamiliar profile. Was that a gold earring upon his left earlobe?

The plane is away, in the direction from which it had come. Nor does it return.

I am shaken. Someone had flown by for the sole purpose of taking a look at me. How had he found me? And what did he want? If he represents what I fear most, then this is a completely different angle of attack than any I had anticipated.

I clench my hand into a fist and I curse softly. Unprepared. Is that to be the story of my entire life? Always ready for the wrong thing at the right time? Always neglecting the thing that matters most?

Like Kendra?

She is under my protection, is one of the reasons I am here. If I succeed in this enterprise, I will have fulfilled at least a part of my obligation to her. Even if she never knows, even if she never understands…

I push all thoughts of my daughter from my mind. If he even suspected…

The present. Return to the present. Do not spill energy into the past. I stand at the fourth station of my pilgrimage and someone takes my measure. At the third station an epigon tried to take form. I took extreme care in my return to Japan. I am here on false papers, traveling under an assumed name. The years have altered my appearance somewhat and I have assisted them to the extent of darkening my hair and my complexion, defying my customary preferences in clothing, altering my speech patterns, my gait, my eating habits—all of these things easier for me than most others because of the practice I've had in the past. The past…Again, damn it! Could it have worked against me even in this matter? Damn the past! An epigon and a possible human observer this close together. Yes, I am normally paranoid and have been for many years, for good reason. I cannot allow my knowledge of the fact to influence my judgment now, however. I must think clearly.

I see three possibilities. The first is that the flyby means nothing, that it would have occurred had anyone else been standing here—or no one. A joyride, or a search for something else.

It may be so, but my survival instinct will not permit me to accept it. I must assume that this is not the case. Therefore, someone is looking for me. This is either connected with the manifestation of the epigon or it is not. If it is not, a large bag of live bait has just been opened at my feet and I have no idea how to begin sorting through the intertwined twistings. There are so many possibilities from my former profession, though I had considered all of these long closed off. Perhaps I should not have. Seeking there for causes seems an impossible undertaking.

The third possibility is the most frightening: that there is a connection between the epigon and the flight. If things have reached the point where both epigons and human agents can be employed, then I may well be doomed to failure. But even more than this, it will mean that the game has taken on another, awesome dimension, an aspect which I had never considered. It will mean that everyone on Earth is in far greater peril than I had assumed, that I am the only one aware of it and that my personal duel has been elevated to a struggle of global proportions. I cannot take the risk of assigning it to my paranoia now. I must assume the worst.

My eyes overflow. I know how to die. I once knew how to lose with grace and detachment. I can no longer afford this luxury. If I bore any hidden notion of yielding, I banish it now. My weapon is a frail one but I must wield it. If the gods come down from Fuji and tell me, "Daughter, it is our will that you desist," I must still continue in this to the end, though I suffer in the hells of the *Yu Li Ch'ao Chuan* forever. Never before have I realized the force of fate.

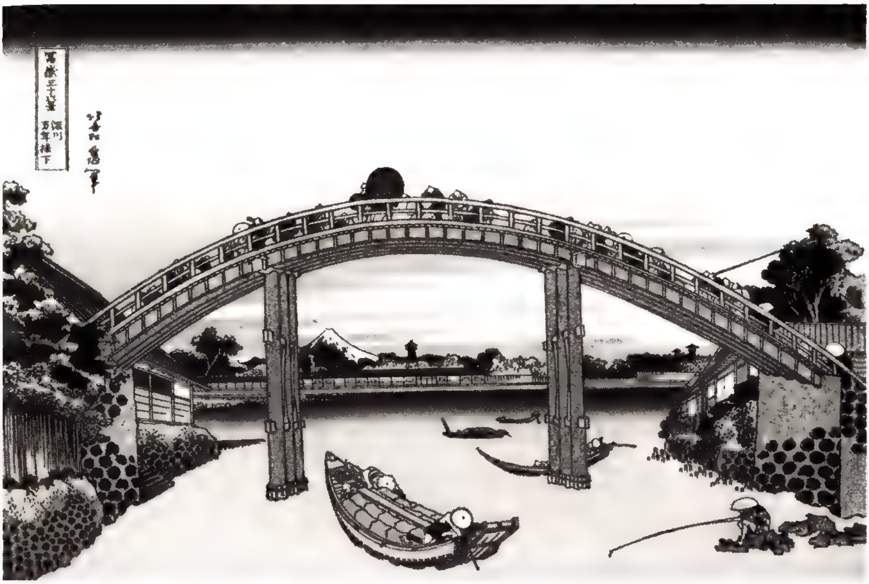
I sink slowly to my knees. For it is a god that I must vanquish.

My tears are no longer for myself.

5. MT. FUJI FROM FUKAGAWA IN EDO

Tokyo. Ginza and confusion. Traffic and pollution. Noise, color and faces, faces, faces. I once loved scenes such as this, but I have been away from cities for too long. And to return to a city such as this is overpowering, almost paralyzing.

Neither is it the old Edo of the print, and I take yet another chance in coming here, though caution rides my every move.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

It is difficult to locate a bridge approachable from an angle proper to simulate the view of Fuji beneath it, in the print. The water is of the wrong color and I wrinkle my nose at the smell; this bridge is not that bridge; there are no peaceful fisher folk here; and gone the greenery. Hokusai exhales sharply and stares as I do at Fuji-san beneath the metal span. His bridge was a graceful rainbow of wood, product of gone days.

Yet there is something to the thrust and dream of any bridge. Hart Crane could find poetry in those of this sort. "Harp and altar, of the fury fused…"

And Nietzsche's bridge that is humanity, stretching on toward the superhuman…

No. I do not like that one. Better had I never become involved with that which transcends. Let it be my *pons asinorum.*

With but a slight movement of my head I adjust the perspective. Now it seems as if Fuji supports the bridge and without his presence it will be broken like Bifröst, preventing the demons of the past from attacking our present Asgard—or perhaps the demons of the future from storming our ancient Asgard.

I move my head again. Fuji drops. The bridge remains intact. Shadow and substance.

The backfire of a truck causes me to tremble. I am only just arrived and I feel I have been here too long. Fuji seems too distant and I too exposed. I must retreat.

Is there a lesson in this or only a farewell?

A lesson, for the soul of the conflict hangs before my eyes: I will not be dragged across Nietzsche's bridge.

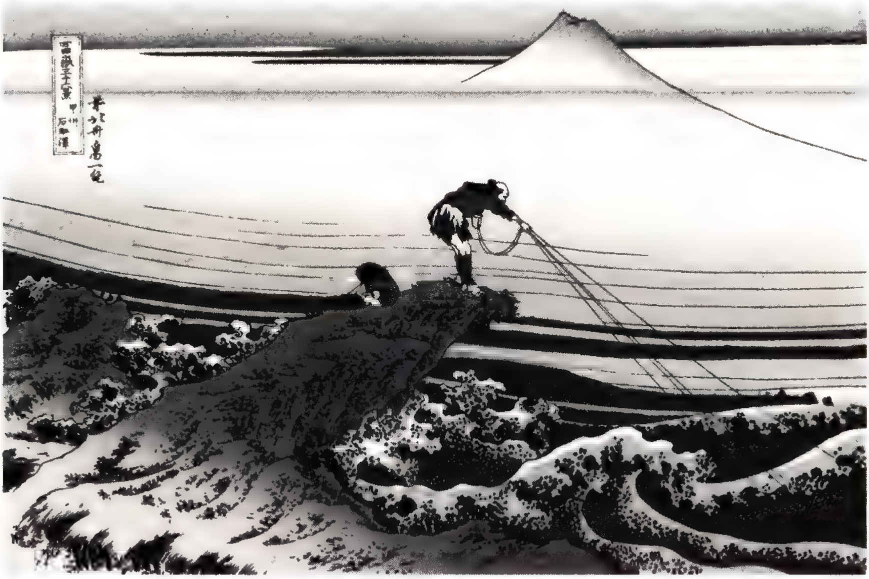
Come, Hokusai, *ukiyo-e* Ghost of Christmas Past, show me another scene.

6. MT. FUJI FROM KAJIKAZAWA

Misted, mystic Fuji over water. Air that comes clean to my nostrils. There is even a fisherman almost where he should be, his pose less dramatic than the original, his garments more modern, above the infinite Fourier series of waves advancing upon the shore.

On my way to this point I visited a small chapel surrounded by a stone wall. It was dedicated to Kwannon, goddess of compassion and mercy, comforter in times of danger and sorrow. I entered. I loved her when I was a girl, until I learned that she was really a man. Then I felt cheated, almost betrayed. She was Kwan Yin in China, and just as merciful, but she came there from India, where she had been a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara, a man—"the Lord Who Looks Down with Compassion." In Tibet he is Chen-re-zi—"He of the Compassionate Eyes"—who gets incarnated regularly as the Dalai Lama. I did not trust all of this fancy footwork on his/her part, and Kwannon lost something of her enchantment for me with this smattering of history and anthropology. Yet I entered. We revisit the mental landscape of childhood in times of trouble. I stayed for a time and the child within me danced for a moment, then fell still.

I watch the fisherman above those waves, smaller versions of Hokusai's big one, which has always symbolized death for me. The little deaths rolling about him, the man hauls in a silver-sided catch. I recall a tale from the *Arabian Nights*, another of American Indian origin. I might also see Christian symbolism, or a Jungian archetype. But I remember that Ernest Hemingway told Bernard Berenson that the secret of his greatest book was that there was no symbolism. The sea was the sea, the old man an old man, the boy a boy, the marlin a marlin, and the sharks the same as other sharks. People empower these things themselves, groping beneath the surface, always looking for more. With me it is at least understandable.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

I spent my earliest years in Japan, my later childhood in the United States. There is a part of me which likes to see things through allusions and touched with mystery. And the American part never trusts anything and is always looking for the real story behind the front one.

As a whole, I would say that it is better not to trust, though lines of interpretation must be drawn at some point before the permutations of causes in which I indulge overflow my mind. I am so, nor will I abandon this quality of character which has served me well in the past. This does not invalidate Hemingway's viewpoint any more than his does mine, for no one holds a monopoly on wisdom. In my present situation, however, I believe that mine has a higher survival potential, for I am not dealing only with *things*, but of something closer to the time honored Powers and Principalities. I wish that it were not so and that an epigon were only an artifact akin to the ball lightning Tesla studied. But there is something behind it, surely as that yellow airplane had its pilot.

The fisherman sees me and waves. It is a peculiar feeling, this sudden commerce with a point of philosophical departure. I wave back with a feeling of pleasure.

I am surprised at the readiness with which I accept this emotion. I feel it has to do with the general state of my health. All of this fresh air and hiking seems to have strengthened me. My senses are sharper, my appetite better. I have lost some weight and gained some muscle. I have not required medication for several days.

I wonder…?

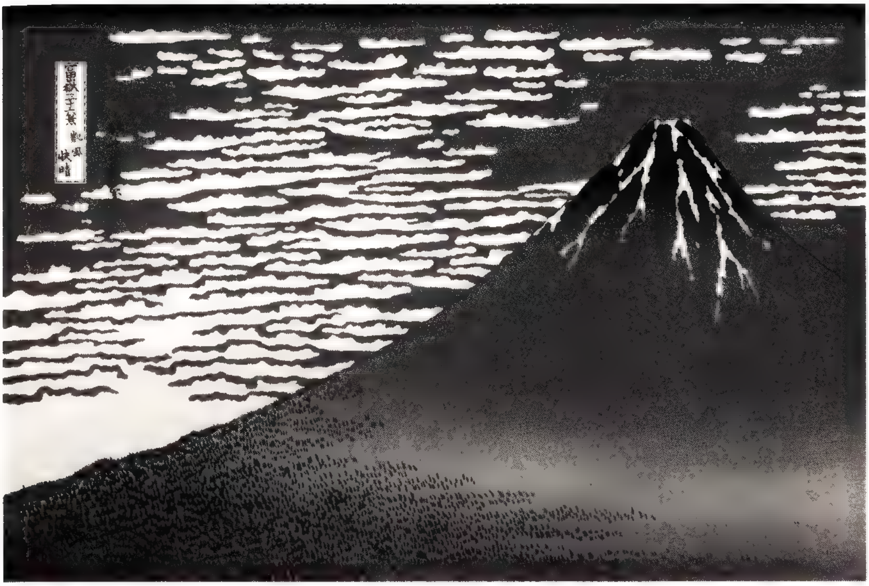
Is this entirely a good thing? True, I must keep up my strength. I must be ready for many things. But too much strength… Could that be self defeating in terms of my overall plan? A balance, perhaps I should seek a balance—

I laugh, for the first time since I do not remember when. It is ridiculous to dwell on life and death, sickness and health this way, like a character of Thomas Mann's, when I am barely a quarter of the way into my journey. I will need all of my strength—and possibly more—along the way. Sooner or later the bill will be presented. If the timing is off, I must make my own *suki*. In the meantime, I resolve to enjoy what I have.

When I strike, it will be with my final exhalation. I know that. It is a phenomenon familiar to martial artists of many persuasions. I recall the story Eugen Herrigel told, of studying with the *kyudo* master, of drawing the bow and waiting, waiting till something signaled the release of the string. For two years he did this before his *sensei* gave him an arrow. I forget for how long it was after that that he repeated the act with the arrow. Then it all began to come together, the timeless moment of rightness would occur and the arrow would have to fly, would have to fly for the target. It was a long while before he realized that this moment would always occur at the end of an exhalation.

In art, so in life. It seems that many important things, from death to orgasm, occur at the moment of emptiness, at the point of the breath's hesitation. Perhaps all of them are but reflections of death. This is a profound realization for one such as myself, for my strength must ultimately be drawn from my weakness. It is the control, the ability to find that special moment that troubles me most. But like walking, talking, or bearing a child, I trust that something within me knows where it lies. It is too late now to attempt to build it a bridge to my consciousness. I have made my small plans. I have placed them upon a shelf in the back of my mind. I should leave them and turn to other matters.

In the meantime I drink this moment with a deep draught of salty air, telling myself that the ocean is the ocean, the fisherman is a fisherman, and Fuji is only a mountain. Slowly then, I exhale it…



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

7. MT. FUJI FROM THE FOOT

Fire in your guts, winter tracks above like strands of ancient hair. The print is somewhat more baleful than the reality this evening. That awful red tinge does not glow above me against a horde of wild clouds. Still, I am not unmoved. It is difficult, before the ancient powers of the Ring of Fire, not to stand with some trepidation, sliding back through geological eons to times of creation and destruction when new lands were formed. The great outpourings, the bomblike flash and dazzle, the dance of the lightnings like a crown…

I meditate on fire and change.

Last night I slept in the precincts of a small Shingon temple, among shrubs trimmed in the shapes of dragons, pagodas, ships, and umbrellas. There were a number of pilgrims of the more conventional sort present at the temple, and the priest performed a fire service—a *goma*—for us. The fires of Fuji remind me, as it reminded me of Fuji.

The priest, a young man, sat at the altar which held the fire basin. He intoned the prayer and built the fire and I watched, completely fascinated by the ritual, as he began to feed the fire with the hundred and eight sticks of wood. These, I have been told, represent the hundred and eight illusions of the soul. While I am not familiar with the full list, I felt it possible that I could come up with a couple of new ones. No matter. He chanted, ringing bells, striking gongs and drums. I glanced at the other *henros*. I saw total absorption upon all of their faces. All but one.

Another figure had joined us, entering with total silence, and he stood in the shadows off to my right. He was dressed all in black, and the wing of a wide, upturned collar masked the lower portion of his face. He was staring at me. When our eyes met, he looked away, focusing his gaze upon the fire. After several moments I did the same.

The priest added incense, leaves, oils. The fire sizzled and spit, the flames leaped, the shadows danced. I began to tremble. There was something familiar about the man. I could not place him, but I wanted a closer look.

I edged slowly to my right during the next ten minutes, as if angling for better views of the ceremony. Suddenly then, I turned and regarded the man again.

I caught him studying me once more, and again he looked away quickly. But the dance of the flames caught him full in the face with light this time, and the jerking of his head withdrew it from the shelter of his collar.

I was certain, in that instant's viewing, that he was the man who had piloted the small yellow plane past me last week at Tamagawa. Though he wore no gold earring there was a shadow filled indentation in the lobe of his left ear.

But it went beyond that. Having seen him full-face I was certain that I had seen him somewhere before, years ago. I have an unusually good memory for faces, but for some reason I could not place his within its prior context. He frightened me, though, and I felt there was good reason for it.

The ceremony continued until the final stick of wood was placed in the fire and the priest completed his liturgy as it burned and died down. He turned then, silhouetted by the light, and said that it was time for any who were ailing to rub the healing smoke upon themselves if they wished.

Two of the pilgrims moved forward. Slowly, another joined them. I glanced to my right once more. The man was gone, as silently as he had come. I cast my gaze all about the temple. He was nowhere in sight. I felt a touch upon my left shoulder.

Turning, I beheld the priest, who had just struck me lightly with the three pronged brass ritual instrument which he had used in the ceremony.

"Come," he said, "and take the smoke. You need healing of the left arm and shoulder, the left hip and foot."

"How do you know this?" I asked him.

"It was given to me to see this tonight. Come."

He indicated a place to the left of the altar and I moved to it, startled at his insight, for the places he had named had been growing progressively more numb though out the day. I had refrained from taking my medicine, hoping that the attack would remit of its own accord.

He massaged me, rubbing the smoke from the dying fire into the places he had named, then instructing me to continue it on my own. I did so, and some on my head at the end, as is traditional.

I searched the grounds later, but my strange observer was nowhere to be found. I located a hiding place between the feet of a dragon and cast my bedroll there. My sleep was not disturbed.

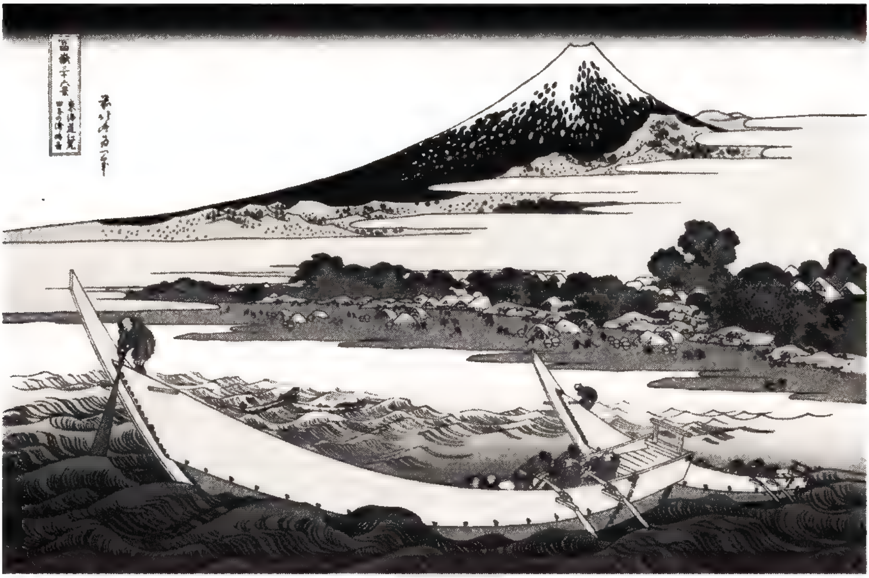
I awoke before dawn to discover that full sensation had returned to all of my previously numbed areas. I was pleased that the attack had remitted without medication.

The rest of the day, as I journeyed here, to the foot of Fuji, I felt surprisingly well. Even now I am filled with unusual strength and energy, and it frightens me. What if the smoke of the fire ceremony has somehow effected a cure? I am afraid of what it could do to my plans, my resolve. I am not sure that I would know how to deal with it.

Thus, Fuji, Lord of the Hidden Fire, I have come, fit and afraid. I will camp near here tonight. In the morning I will move on. Your presence overwhelms me at this range. I will withdraw for a different, more distant perspective. If I were ever to climb you, would I cast one hundred and eight sticks into your holy furnace, I wonder? I think not. There are some illusions I do not wish to destroy.

8. MT. FUJI FROM TAGONOURA

I came out in a boat to look back upon the beach, the slopes, and Fuji. I am still in glowing remission. I have resigned myself to it, for now. In the meantime, the day is bright, the sea breeze cool. The boat is rocked by the small deaths, as the fisherman and his sons whom I have paid to bring me out steer it at my request to



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

provide me with the view most approximating that of the print. So much of the domestic architecture in this land recommends to my eye the prows of ships. A convergence of cultural evolution where the message is the medium? The sea is life? Drawing sustenance from beneath the waves we are always at sea? Or, the sea is death, it may rise to blight our lands and claim our lives at any moment? Therefore, we bear this *memento mori* even in the roofs above our heads and the walls which sustain them? Or, this is the sign of our power, over life and death?

Or none of the above. It may seem that I harbor a strong deathwish. This is incorrect. My desires are just the opposite. It may indeed be that I am using Hokusai's prints as a kind of Rorschach for self discovery, but it is death-fascination rather than deathwish that informs my mind. I believe that this is understandable in one suffering a terminal condition with a very short term to it.

Enough of that for now. It was meant only as a drawing of my blade to examine its edge for keenness. I find that my weapon is still in order and I resheathe it.

Blue gray Fuji, salted with snow, long angle of repose to my left… I never seem to look upon the same mountain twice. You change as much as I myself, yet you remain what you are. Which means that there is hope for me.

I lower my eyes to where we share this quality with the sea, vast living data-net. Like yet unlike, you have fought that sea as I—

Birds. Let me listen and watch them for a time, the air riders who dip and feed.

I watch the men work with the nets. It is relaxing to behold their nimble movements. After a time, I doze.

Sleeping, I dream, and dreaming I behold the god Kokuzo. It can be no other, for when he draws his blade which flashes like the sun and points it at me, he speaks his name. He repeats it over and over as I tremble before him, but something is wrong. I know that he is telling me something other than his identity. I reach for but cannot grasp the meaning. Then he moves the point of his blade, indicating something beyond me. I turn my head. I behold the man in black—the pilot, the watcher at the *goma*. He is studying me, just as he was that night. What does he seek in my face?

I am awakened by a violent rocking of the boat as we strike a rougher sea. I catch hold of the gunwale beside which I sit. A quick survey of my surroundings shows me that we are in no danger, and I turn my eyes to Fuji. Is he laughing at me? Or is it the chuckle of Hokusai, who squats on his hams beside me tracing naughty pictures in the moisture of the boat's bottom with a long, withered finger?

If a mystery cannot be solved, it must be saved. Later, then. I will return to the message when my mind has moved into a new position.

Soon, another load of fish is being hauled aboard to add to the pungency of this voyage. Wriggle howsoever they will they do not escape the net. I think of Kendra and wonder how she is holding up. I hope that her anger with me has abated. I trust that she has not escaped her imprisonment. I left her in the care of acquaintances at a primitive, isolated commune in the Southwest. I do not like the place, nor am I overfond of its residents. Yet they owe me several large favors—intentionally bestowed against these times—and they will keep her there until certain things come to pass. I see her delicate features, fawn eyes, and silken hair. A bright, graceful girl, used to some luxuries, fond of long soaks and frequent showers, crisp garments. She is probably mud spattered or dusty at the moment, from slopping hogs, weeding, planting vegetables or harvesting them, or any of a number of basic chores. Perhaps it will be good for her character. She ought to get something from the experience other than preservation from a possibly terrible fate.

Time passes. I take my lunch.

Later, I muse upon Fuji, Kokuzo, and my fears. Are dreams but the tranced mind's theater of fears and desires, or do they sometimes truly reflect unconsidered aspects of reality, perhaps to give warning? To reflect…It is said that the perfect mind reflects. The *shintai* in its ark in its shrine is the thing truly sacred to the god—a small mirror—not the images. The sea reflects the sky, in fullness of cloud or blue emptiness. Hamlet-like, one can work many interpretations of the odd, but only one should have a clear outline. I hold the dream in my mind once more, absent all querying. Something is moving…

No. I almost had it. But I reached too soon. My mirror is shattered.

Staring shoreward, the matter of synchronicity occurs. There is a new grouping of people. I withdraw my small spy scope and take its measure, already knowing what I will regard.

Again, he wears black. He is speaking with two men upon the beach. One of the men gestures out across the water, toward us. The distance is too great to make out features clearly, but I know that it is the same man. But now it is not fear that I know. A slow anger begins to burn within my *hara*. I would return to shore and confront him. He is only one man. I will deal with him now. I cannot afford any more of the unknown than that for which I have already provided. He must be met properly, dismissed or accounted for.

I call to the captain to take me ashore immediately.

He grumbles. The fishing is good, the day still young. I offer him more money. Reluctantly, he agrees. He calls orders to his sons to put the boat about and head in.

I stand in the bow. Let him have a good look. I send my anger on ahead. The sword is as sacred an object as the mirror.

As Fuji grows before me the man glances in our direction, hands something to the others, then turns and ambles away. No! There is no way to hasten our progress, and at this rate he will be gone before I reach land. I curse. I want immediate satisfaction, not extension of mystery.

And the men with whom he was speaking… Their hands go to their pockets, they laugh, then walk off in another direction. Drifters. Did he pay them for whatever information they gave him? So it would seem. And are they heading now for some tavern to drink up the price of my peace of mind? I call out after them but the wind whips my words away. They, too, will be gone by the time I arrive.

And this is true. When I finally stand upon the beach, the only familiar face is that of my mountain, gleaming like a carbuncle in sun's slanting rays.

I dig my nails into my palms but my arms do not become wings.

9. MT. FUJI FROM NABORITO

I am fond of this print: the *torii* of a Shinto shrine are visible above the sea at low tide, and people dig clams amid the sunken ruins. Fuji of course is visible through the *torii*. Were it a Christian church beneath the waves puns involving the Clam of God would be running through my mind. Geography saves, however.

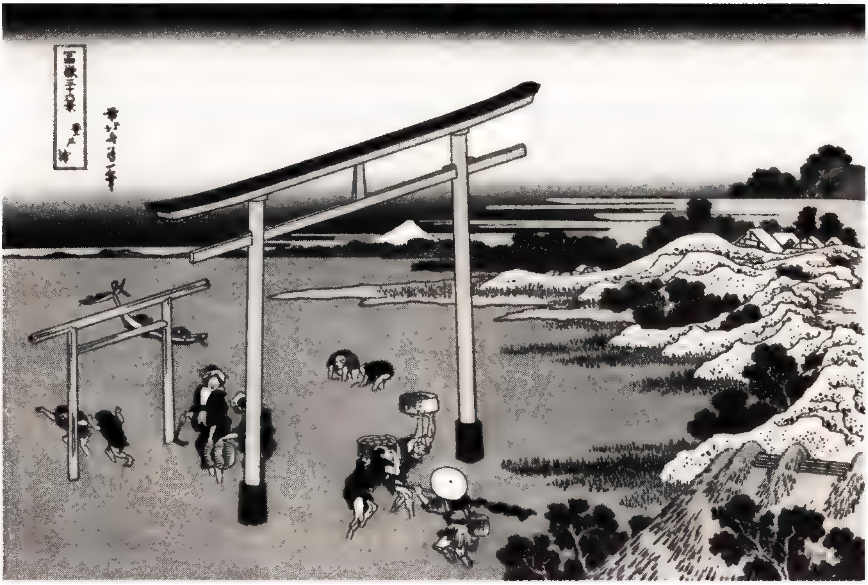
And reality differs entirely. I cannot locate the place.

I am in the area and Fuji properly situated, but the *torii* must be long gone and I have no way of knowing whether there is a sunken temple out there.

I am seated on a hillside looking across the water and I am suddenly not just tired but exhausted. I have come far and fast these past several days, and it seems that my exertions have all caught up with me. I will sit here and watch the sea and the sky. At least my shadow, the man in black, has been nowhere visible since the beach at Tagonoura. A young cat chases a moth at the foot of my hill, leaping into the air, white-gloved paws flashing. The moth gains altitude, escapes in a gust of wind. The cat sits for several moments, big eyes staring after it.

I make my way to a declivity I had spotted earlier, where I might be free of the wind. There I lay my pack and cast my bedroll, my poncho beneath it. After removing my shoes I get inside quickly. I seem to have taken a bit of a chill and my limbs are very heavy. I would have been willing to pay to sleep indoors tonight but I am too tired to seek shelter.

I lie here and watch the lights come on in the darkening sky. As usual in cases of extreme fatigue, sleep does not come to me easily. Is this legitimate tiredness or a symptom of something else? I do not wish to take medication merely as a precaution, though, so I try thinking of nothing for a time. This does not work. I am overcome with the desire for a cup of hot tea. In its absence I swallow a jigger of brandy, which warms my insides for a time.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

Still, sleep eludes me and I decide to tell myself a story as I did when I was very young and wanted to make the world turn into dream.

So…Upon a time during the troubles following the death of the Retired Emperor Sutoku a number of itinerant monks of various persuasions came this way, having met upon the road, traveling to seek respite from the wars, earthquakes, and whirlwinds which so disturbed the land. They hoped to found a religious community and pursue the meditative life in quiet and tranquillity. They came upon what appeared to be a deserted Shinto shrine near the seaside, and there they camped for the night, wondering what plague or misfortune might have carried off its attendants. The place was in good repair and no evidence of violence was to be seen. They discussed then the possibility of making this their retreat, of themselves becoming the shrine's attendants. They grew enthusiastic with the idea and spent much of the night talking over these plans. In the morning, however, an ancient priest appeared from within the shrine, as if to commence a day's duties. The monks asked him the story of the place, and he informed them that once there had been others to assist him in his duties but that they had long ago been taken by the sea during a storm, while about their peculiar devotions one night upon the shore. And no, it was not really a Shinto shrine, though in outward appearance it seemed such. It was actually the temple of a far older religion of which he could well be the last devotee. They were welcome, however, to join him here and learn of it if they so wished. The monks discussed it quickly among themselves and decided that since it was a pleasant seeming place, it might be well to stay and hear whatever teaching the old man possessed. So they became residents at the strange shrine. The place troubled several of them considerably at first, for at night they seemed to hear the calling of musical voices in the waves and upon the sea wind. And on occasion it seemed as if they could hear the old priest's voice responding to these calls. One night one of them followed the sounds and saw the old man standing upon the beach, his arms upraised. The monk hid himself and later fell asleep in a crevice in the rocks. When he awoke, a full moon stood high in the heavens and the old man was gone. The monk went down to the place where he had stood and there saw many marks in the sand, all of them the prints of webbed feet. Shaken, the monk returned and recited his experience to his fellows. They spent weeks thereafter trying to catch a glimpse of the old man's feet, which were always wrapped and bound. They did not succeed, but after a time it seemed to matter less and less. His teachings influenced them slowly but steadily. They began to assist him in his rituals to the Old Ones, and they learned the name of this promontory and its shrine. It was the last above-sea remnant of a large sunken island, which he assured them rose on certain wondrous occasions to reveal a lost city inhabited by the servants of his masters. The name of the place was R'lyeh and they would be happy to go there one day. By then it seemed a good idea, for they had noticed a certain thickening and extension of the skin between their fingers and toes, the digits themselves becoming sturdier and more elongated. By then, too, they were participating in all of the rites, which grew progressively abominable. At length, after a particularly gory ritual, the old priest's promise was fulfilled in reverse. Instead of the island rising, the promontory sank to join it, bearing the shrine and all of the monks along with it. So their abominations are primarily aquatic now. But once every century or so the whole island does indeed rise up for a night, and troops of them make their way ashore seeking victims. And of course, tonight is the night…

A delicious feeling of drowsiness has finally come over me with this telling, based upon some of my favorite bedtime stories. My eyes are closed. I float on a cotton filled raft…I—

A sound! Above me! Toward the sea. Something moving my way. Slowly, then quickly.

Adrenaline sends a circuit of fire through my limbs. I extend my hand carefully, quietly, and take hold of my staff.

Waiting. Why now, when I am weakened? Must danger always approach at the worst moment?

There is a thump as it strikes the ground beside me, and I let out the breath I have been holding.

It is the cat, little more than a kitten, which I had observed earlier. Purring, it approaches. I reach out and stroke it. It rubs against me. After a time I take it into the bag. It curls up at my side, still purring, warm. It is good to have something that trusts you and wants to be near you. I call the cat R'lyeh. Just for one night.

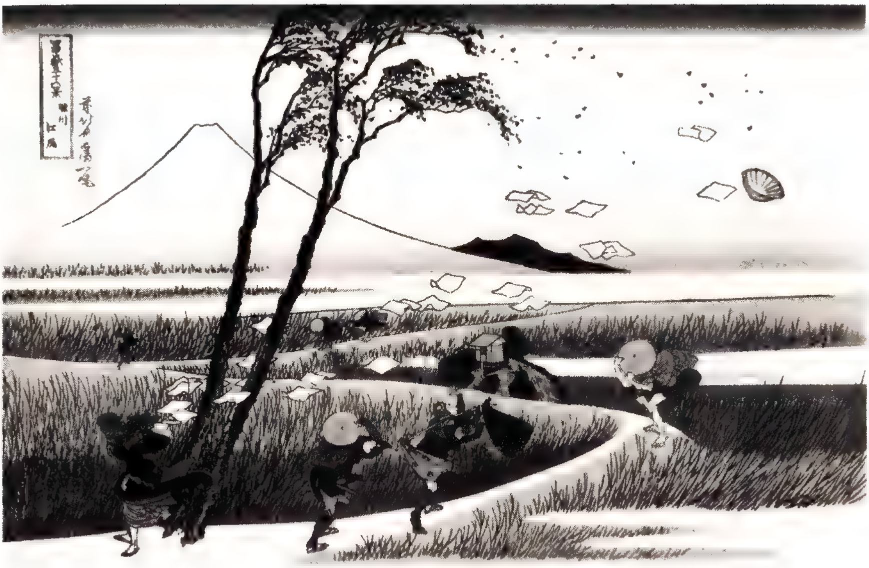
10. MT. FUJI FROM EJIRI

I took the bus back this way. I was too tired to hike. I have taken my medicine as I probably should have been doing all along. Still, it could be several days before it brings me some relief, and this frightens me. I cannot really afford such a condition. I am not certain what I will do, save that I must go on.

The print is deceptive, for a part of its force lies in the effects of a heavy wind. Its skies are gray, Fuji is dim in the background, the people on the road and the two trees beside it all suffer from the wind's buffeting. The trees bend, the people clutch at their garments, there is a hat high in the air and some poor scribe or author has had his manuscript snatched skyward to flee from him across the land (reminding me of an old cartoon—Editor to Author: "A funny thing happened to your manuscript during the St. Patrick's Day Parade"). The scene which confronts me is less active at a meteorological level. The sky is indeed overcast but there is no wind, Fuji is darker, more clearly delineated than in the print, there are no struggling pedestrians in sight. There are many more trees near at hand. I stand near a small grove, in fact. There are some structures in the distance which are not present in the picture.

I lean heavily upon my staff. Live a little, die a little. I have reached my tenth station and I still do not know whether Fuji is giving me strength or taking it from me. Both, perhaps.

I head off into the wood, my face touched by a few raindrops as I go. There are no signs posted and no one seems to be about. I work my way back from the road, coming at last to a small clear area



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

containing a few rocks and boulders. It will do as a campsite. I want nothing more than to spend the day resting.

I soon have a small fire going, my tiny teapot poised on rocks above it. A distant roll of thunder adds variety to my discomfort, but so far the rain has held off. The ground is damp, however. I spread my poncho and sit upon it while I wait. I hone a knife and put it away. I eat some biscuits and study a map. I suppose I should feel some satisfaction, in that things are proceeding somewhat as I intended. I wish that I could, but I do not.

An unspecified insect which has been making buzzing noises somewhere behind me ceases its buzzing. I hear a twig snap a moment later. My hand snakes out to fall upon my staff.

"Don't," says a voice at my back.

I turn my head. He is standing eight or ten feet from me, the man in black, earring in place, his right hand in his jacket pocket. And it looks as if there is more than his hand in there, pointed at me.

I remove my hand from my staff and he advances. With the side of his foot he sends the staff partway across the clearing, out of my reach. Then he removes his hand from his pocket, leaving behind whatever it held. He circles slowly to the other side of the fire, staring at me the while.

He seats himself upon a boulder, lets his hands rest upon his knees.

"Mari?" he asks then.

I do not respond to my name, but stare back. The light of Kokuzo's dream sword flashes in my mind, pointing at him, and I hear the god speaking his name only not quite.

"Kotuzov!" I say then.

The man in black smiles, showing that the teeth I had broken once long ago are now neatly capped.

"I was not so certain of you at first either," he says.

Plastic surgery has removed at least a decade from his face, along with a lot of weathering and several scars. He is different about the eyes and cheeks, also. And his nose is smaller. It is a considerable improvement over the last time we met.

"Your water is boiling," he says then. "Are you going to offer me a cup of tea?"

"Of course," I reply, reaching for my pack, where I keep an extra cup.

"Slowly."

"Certainly."

I locate the cup, I rinse them both lightly with hot water, I prepare the tea.

"No, don't pass it to me," he says, and he reaches forward and takes the cup from where I had filled it.

I suppress a desire to smile.

"Would you have a lump of sugar?" he asks.

"Sorry."

He sighs and reaches into his other pocket, from which he withdraws a small flask.

"Vodka? In tea?"

"Don't be silly. My tastes have changed. It's Wild Turkey liqueur, a wonderful sweetener. Would you care for some?"

"Let me smell it."

There is a certain sweetness to the aroma.

"All right," I say, and he laces our tea with it.

We taste the tea. Not bad.

"How long has it been?" he asks.

"Fourteen years—almost fifteen," I tell him. "Back in the eighties."

"Yes."

He rubs his jaw. "I'd heard you'd retired."

"You heard right. It was about a year after our last encounter."

"Turkey—yes. You married a man from your Code Section."

I nod.

"You were widowed three or four years later. Daughter born after your husband's death. Returned to the States. Settled in the country. That's all I know."

"That's all there is."

He takes another drink of tea.

"Why did you come back here?"

"Personal reasons. Partly sentimental."

"Under a false identity?"

"Yes. It involves my husband's family. I don't want them to know I'm here."

"Interesting. You mean that they would watch arrivals as closely as we have?"

"I didn't know you watched arrivals here."

"Right now we do."

"You've lost me. I don't know what's going on."

There is another roll of thunder. A few more drops spatter about us.

"I would like to believe that you are really retired," he says. "I'm getting near that point myself, you know."

"I have no reason to be back in business. I inherited a decent amount, enough to take care of me and my daughter."

He nods.

"If I had such an inducement I would not be in the field," he says. "I would rather sit home and read, play chess, eat and drink regularly. But you must admit it is quite a coincidence your being here when the future success of several nations is being decided."

I shake my head.

"I've been out of touch with a lot of things."

"The Osaka Oil Conference. It begins two weeks from Wednesday. You were planning perhaps to visit Osaka at about that time?"

"I will not be going to Osaka."

"A courier then. Someone from there will meet you, a simple tourist, at some point in your travels, to convey—"

"My God! Do you think everything's a conspiracy, Boris? I am just taking care of some personal problems and visiting some places that mean something to me. The conference doesn't."

"All right." He finishes his tea and puts the cup aside. "You know that we know you are here. A word to the Japanese authorities that you are traveling under false papers and they will kick you out. That would be simplest. No real harm done and one agent nullified.

Only it would be a shame to spoil your trip if you are indeed only a tourist…"

A rotten thought passes through my mind as I see where this is leading, and I know that my thought is far rottener than his. It is something I learned from a strange old woman I once worked with who did not look like an old woman.

I finish my tea and raise my eyes. He is smiling.

"I will make us some more tea," I say.

I see that the top button of my shirt comes undone while I am bent partly away from him. Then I lean forward with his cup and take a deep breath.

"You would consider not reporting me to the authorities?"

"I might," he says. "I think your story is probably true. And even if it is not, you would not take the risk of transporting anything now that I know about you."

"I really want to finish this trip," I say, blinking a few extra times. "I would do anything not to be sent back now."

He takes hold of my hand.

"I am glad you said that, Maryushka," he replies. "I am lonely, and you are still a fine-looking woman."

"You think so?"

"I always thought so, even that day you bashed in my teeth."

"Sorry about that. It was strictly business, you know."

His hand moves to my shoulder.

"Of course. They looked better when they were fixed than they had before, anyway."

He moves over and sits beside me.

"I have dreamed of doing this many times," he tells me, as he unfastens the rest of the buttons on my shirt and unbuckles my belt.

He rubs my belly softly. It is not an unpleasant feeling. It has been a long time.

Soon we are fully undressed. He takes his time, and when he is ready I welcome him between my legs. All right, Boris. I give the ride, you take the fall. I could almost feel a little guilty about it. You are gentler than I'd thought you would be. I commence the proper breathing pattern, deep and slow. I focus my attention on my *hara* and his, only inches away. I feel our energies, dreamlike and warm, moving. Soon, I direct their flow. He feels it only as pleasure, perhaps more draining than usual. When he has done, though…

"You said you had some problem?" he inquires in that masculine coital magnanimity generally forgotten a few minutes afterward. "If it is something I could help you with, I have a few days off, here and there. I like you, Maryushka."

"It's something I have to do myself. Thanks anyway."

I continue the process.

Later, as I dress myself, he lies there looking up at me.

"I must be getting old, Maryushka," he reflects. "You have tired me. I feel I could sleep for a week."

"That sounds about right," I say. "A week and you should be feeling fine again."

"I do not understand…"

"You've been working too hard, I'm sure. That conference…"

He nods.

"You are probably right. You are not really involved…?"

"I am really not involved."

"Good."

I clean the pot and my cups. I restore them to my pack.

"Would you be so kind as to move, Boris dear? I'll be needing the poncho very soon, I think."

"Of course."

He rises slowly and passes it to me. He begins dressing. His breathing is heavy.

"Where are you going from here?"

"Mishima-goe," I say, "for another view of my mountain."

He shakes his head. He finishes dressing and seats himself on the ground, his back against a treetrunk. He finds his flask and takes a swallow. He extends it then.

"Would you care for some?"

"Thank you, no. I must be on my way."

I retrieve my staff. When I look at him again, he smiles faintly, ruefully.

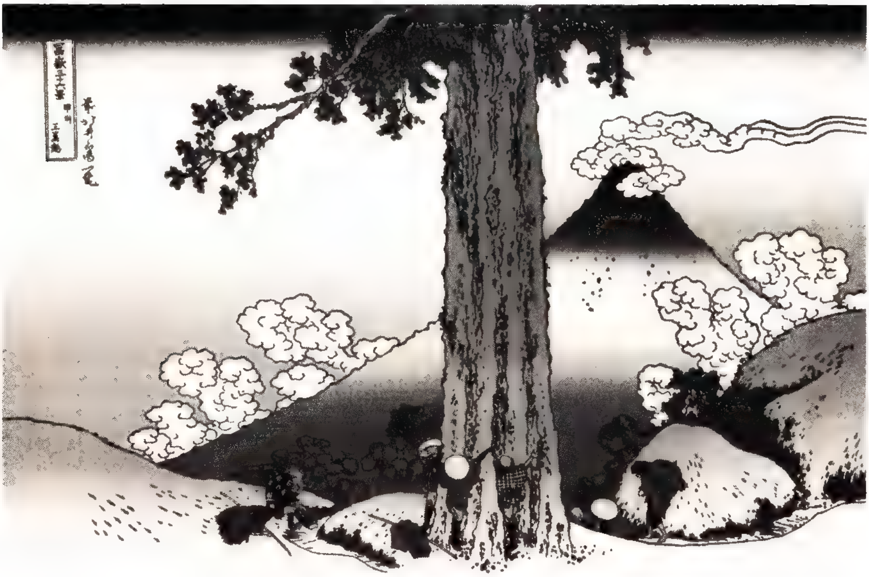
"You take a lot out of a man, Maryushka."

"I had to," I say.

I move off. I will hike twenty miles today, I am certain. The rain begins to descend before I am out of the grove; leaves rustle like the wings of bats.

11. MT. FUJI FROM MISHIMA-GOE

Sunlight. Clean air. The print shows a big cryptameria tree, Fuji looming behind it, crowned with smoke. There is no smoke



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

today, but I have located a big cryptameria and positioned myself so that it cuts Fuji's shoulder to the left of the cone. There are a few clouds, not so popcorny as Hokusai's smoke (he shrugs at this), and they will have to do.

My stolen *ki* still sustains me, though the medication is working now beneath it. Like a transplanted organ, my body will soon reject the borrowed energy. By then, though, the drugs should be covering for me.

In the meantime, the scene and the print are close to each other. It is a lovely spring day. Birds are singing, butterflies stitch the air in zigzag patterns; I can almost hear the growth of plants beneath the soil. The world smells fresh and new. I am no longer being followed. Hello to life again.

I regard the huge old tree and listen for its echoes down the ages: Yggdrasil, the Golden Bough, the Yule tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Bo beneath which Lord Gautama found his soul and lost it…

I move forward to run my hand along its rough bark.

From that position I am suddenly given a new view of the valley below. The fields look like raked sand, the hills like rocks, Fuji a boulder. It is a garden, perfectly laid out…

Later I notice that the sun has moved. I have been standing here for hours. My small illumination beneath a great tree. Older than my humanity, I do not know what I can do for it in return.

Stooping suddenly, I pick up one of its cones. A tiny thing, for such a giant. It is barely the size of my little fingernail. Delicately incised, as if sculpted by fairies.

I put it in my pocket. I will plant it somewhere along my way.

I retreat then, for I hear the sound of approaching bells and I am not yet ready for humanity to break my mood. But there was a small inn down the road which does not look to be part of a chain. I will bathe and eat there and sleep in a bed tonight.

I will still be strong tomorrow.

12. MT. FUJI FROM LAKE KAWAGUCHI

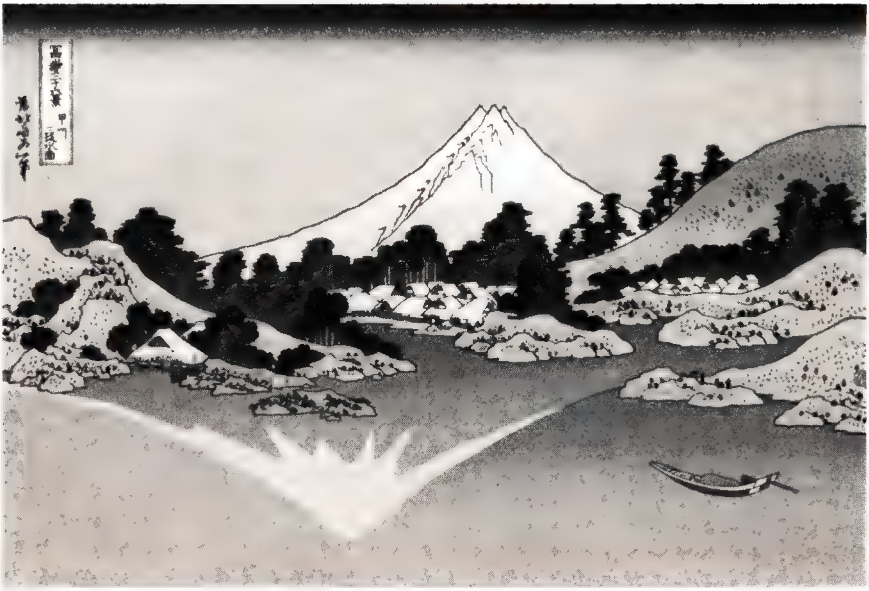
Reflections.

This is one of my favorite prints in the series: Fuji as seen from across the lake and reflected within it. There are green hills at either hand, a small village upon the far shore, a single small boat in sight upon the water. The most fascinating feature of the print is that the reflection of Fuji is not the same as the original; its position is wrong, its slope is wrong, it is snow capped and the surface view of Fuji itself is not.

I sit in the small boat I have rented, looking back. The sky is slightly hazy, which is good. No glare to spoil the reflection. The town is no longer as quaint as in the print, and it has grown. But I am not concerned with details of this sort. Fuji is reflected more perfectly in my viewing, but the doubling is still a fascinating phenomenon for me.

Interesting, too…In the print the village is not reflected, nor is there an image of the boat in the water. The only reflection is Fuji's. There is no sign of humanity.

I see the reflected buildings near the water's edge. And my mind is stirred by other images than those Hokusai would have known. Of course drowned R'lyeh occurs to me, but the place and the day are too idyllic. It fades from mind almost immediately, to be replaced by sunken Ys, whose bells still toll the hours beneath the sea. And Selma Lagerloff's *Nils Holgersson*, the tale of the shipwrecked sailor who finds himself in a sunken city at the bottom of the sea—a place drowned to punish its greedy, arrogant inhab-



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

itants, who still go about their business of cheating each other, though they are all of them dead. They wear rich, old-fashioned clothes and conduct their business as they once did above in this strange land beneath the waves. The sailor is drawn to them, but he knows that he must not be discovered or he will be turned into one of them, never to return to the earth, to see the sun. I suppose I think of this old children's story because I understand now how the sailor must have felt. My discovery, too, could result in a transformation I do not desire.

And of course, as I lean forward and view my own features mirrored in the water, there is the world of Lewis Carroll beneath its looking-glass surface. To be an Ama diving girl and descend… To spin downward, and for a few minutes to know the inhabitants of a land of paradox and great charm…

Mirror, mirror, why does the real world so seldom cooperate with our aesthetic enthusiasms?

Halfway finished. I reach the midpoint of my pilgrimage to confront myself in a lake. It is a good time and place to look upon my own countenance, to reflect upon all of the things which have brought me here, to consider what the rest of the journey may hold. Though images may sometimes lie. The woman who looks back at me seems composed, strong, and better looking than I had thought she would. I like you, Kawaguchi, lake with a human personality. I flatter you with literary compliments and you return the favor.

Meeting Boris lifted a burden of fear from my mind. No human agents of my nemesis have risen to trouble my passage. So the odds have not yet tipped so enormously against me as they might.

Fuji and image. Mountain and soul. Would an evil thing cast no reflection down here—some dark mountain where terrible deeds were performed throughout history? I am reminded that Kit no longer casts a shadow, has no reflection.

Is he truly evil, though? By my lights he is. Especially if he is doing the things I think he is doing.

He said that he loved me, and I did love him, once. What will he say to me when we meet again, as meet we must?

It will not matter. Say what he will, I am going to try to kill him. He believes that he is invincible, indestructible. I do not, though I do believe that I am the only person on Earth capable of destroying him. It took a long time for me to figure the means, an even longer time before the decision to try it was made for me. I must do it for Kendra as well as for myself. The rest of the world's population comes third.

I let my fingers trail in the water. Softly, I begin to sing an old song, a love song. I am loath to leave this place. Will the second half of my journey be a mirror image of the first? Or will I move beyond the looking-glass, to pass into that strange realm where he makes his home?

I planted the cryptameria's seed in a lonesome valley yesterday afternoon. Such a tree will look elegant there one day, outliving nations and armies, madmen and sages.

I wonder where R'lyeh is? She ran off in the morning after breakfast, perhaps to pursue a butterfly. Not that I could have brought her with me.

I hope that Kendra is well. I have written her a long letter explaining many things. I left it in the care of an attorney friend, who will be sending it to her one day in the not too distant future.

The prints of Hokusai…They could outlast the cryptameria. I will not be remembered for any works.

Drifting between the worlds I formulate our encounter for the thousandth time. He will have to be able to duplicate an old trick to get what he wants. I will have to perform an even older one to see that he doesn't get it. We are both out of practice.

It has been long since I read *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. It is not the sort of thing I've sought to divert me in recent years. But I recall a line or two as I see fish dart by: "Polycrates Samius, that flung his ring into the sea, because he would participate in the discontent of others, and had it miraculously restored to him again shortly after, by a fish taken as he angled, was not free from melancholy dispositions. No man can cure himself…" Kit threw away his life and gained it. I kept mine and lost it. Are rings ever really returned to the proper people? And what about a woman curing herself? The cure I seek is a very special one.

Hokusai, you have shown me many things. Can you show me an answer?

Slowly, the old man raises his arm and points to his mountain. Then he lowers it and points to the mountain's image.

I shake my head. It is an answer that is no answer. He shakes his head back at me and points again.

The clouds are massing high above Fuji, but that is no answer. I study them for a long while but can trace no interesting images within.

Then I drop my eyes. Below me, inverted, they take a different form. It is as if they depict the clash of two armed hosts. I watch in fascination as they flow together, the forces from my right gradually rolling over and submerging those to my left. Yet in so doing, those from my right are diminished.

Conflict? That is the message? And both sides lose things they do not wish to lose? Tell me something I do not already know, old man.

He continues to stare. I follow his gaze again, upward. Now I see a dragon, diving into Fuji's cone.

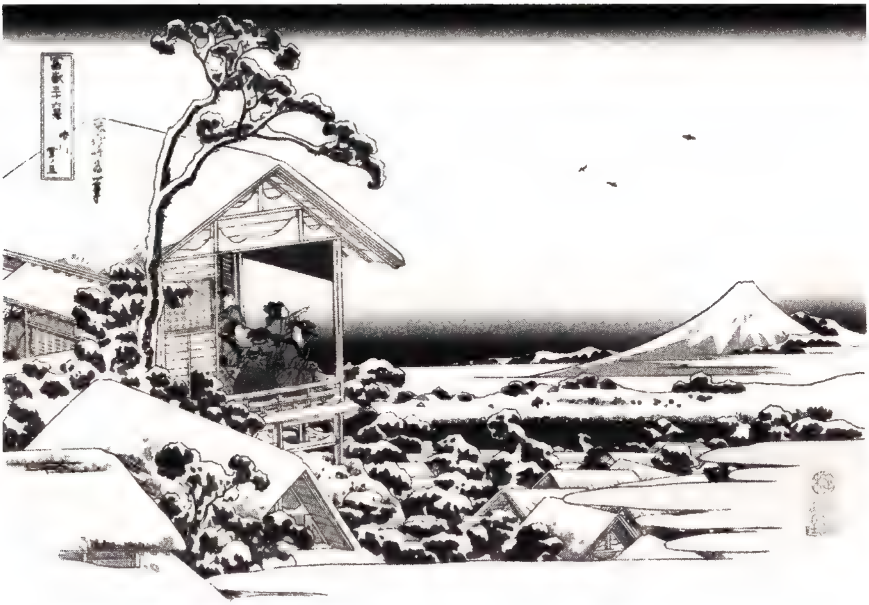
I look below once again. No armies remain, only carnage; and here the dragon's tail becomes a dying warrior's arm holding a sword.

I close my eyes and reach for it. A sword of smoke for a man of fire.

13. MT. FUJI FROM KOISHIKAWA IN EDO

Snow, on the roofs of houses, on evergreens, on Fuji—just beginning to melt in places, it seems. A windowful of women—geishas, I would say—looking out at it, one of them pointing at three dark birds high in the pale sky. My closest view of Fuji to that in the print is unfortunately snowless, geishaless, and sunny.

Details…



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

Both are interesting, and superimposition is one of the major forces of aesthetics. I cannot help but think of the hot spring geisha Komako in *Snow Country*—Yasunari Kawabata's novel of loneliness and wasted, fading beauty—which I have always felt to be the great anti-love story of Japan. This print brings the entire tale to mind for me. The denial of love. Kit was no Shimamura, for he did want me, but only on his own highly specialized terms, terms that must remain unacceptable to me. Selfishness or selflessness? It is not important…

And the birds at which the geisha points…? "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird?" To the point. We could never agree on values.

The Twa Corbies? And throw in Ted Hughes's pugnacious Crow? Perhaps so, but I won't draw straws. —An illusion for every allusion, and where's yesterday's snow?

I lean upon my staff and study my mountain. I wish to make it to as many of my stations as possible before ordering the confrontation. Is that not fair? Twenty four ways of looking at Mt. Fuji. It struck me that it would be good to take one thing in life and regard it from many viewpoints, as a focus for my being, and perhaps as a penance for alternatives missed.

Kit, I am coming, as you once asked of me, but by my own route and for my own reasons. I wish that I did not have to, but you have deprived me of a real choice in this matter. Therefore, my action is not truly my own, but yours. I am become then your own hand turned against you, representative of a kind of cosmic aikido.

I make my way through town after dark, choosing only dark streets where the businesses are shut down. That way I am safe. When I must enter town I always find a protected spot for the day and do my traveling on these streets at night.

I find a small restaurant on the corner of such a one and I take my dinner there. It is a noisy place but the food is good. I also take my medicine, and a little saké.

Afterward, I indulge in the luxury of walking rather than take a taxi. I've a long way to go, but the night is clear and star-filled and the air is pleasant.

I walk for the better part of ten minutes, listening to the sounds of traffic, music from some distant radio or tape deck, a cry from another street, the wind passing high above me and rubbing its rough fur upon the sides of buildings.

Then I feel a sudden ionization in the air.

Nothing ahead. I turn, spinning my staff into a guard position.

An epigon with a six legged canine body and a head like a giant fiery flower emerges from a doorway and sidles along the building's front in my direction.

I follow its progress with my staff, feinting as soon as it is near enough. I strike, unfortunately with the wrong tip, as it comes on. My hair begins to rise as I spin out of its way, cutting, retreating, turning, then striking again. This time the metal tip passes into that floral head.

I had turned on the batteries before I commenced my attack. The charge creates an imbalance. The epigon retreats, head ballooning. I follow and strike again, this time mid-body. It swells even larger, then collapses in a shower of sparks. But I am already turning away and striking again, for I had become aware of the approach of another even as I was dealing with the first.

This one advances in kangaroolike bounds. I brush it by with my staff, but its long bulbous tail strikes me as it passes. I recoil involuntarily from the shock I receive, my reflexes spinning the staff before me as I retreat. It turns quickly and rears then. This one is a quadruped, and its raised forelimbs are fountains of fire. Its faceful of eyes blazes and hurts to look upon.

It drops back onto its haunches then springs again.

I roll beneath it and attack as it descends. But I miss, and it turns to attack again even as I continue thrusting. It springs and I turn aside, striking upward. It seems that I connect, but I cannot be certain.

It lands quite near me, raising its forelimbs. But this time it does not spring. It simply falls forward, hind feet making a rapid shuffling movement the while, the legs seeming to adjust their lengths to accommodate a more perfect flow.

As it comes on, I catch it square in the midsection with the proper end of my staff. It keeps coming, or falling, even as it flares and begins to disintegrate. Its touch stiffens me for a moment, and I feel the flow of its charge down my shoulder and across my breast. I watch it come apart in a final photoflash instant and be gone.

I turn quickly again but there is no third emerging from the doorway. None overhead either. There is a car coming up the street, slowing, however. No matter. The terminal's potential must be exhausted for the moment, though I am puzzled by the consideration of how long it must have been building to produce the two I just dispatched. It is best that I be away quickly now.

As I resume my progress, though, a voice calls to me from the car, which has now drawn up beside me:

"Madam, a moment please."

It is a police car, and the young man who has addressed me wears a uniform and a very strange expression.

"Yes, officer?" I reply.

"I saw you just a few moments ago," he says. "What were you doing?"

I laugh.

"It is such a fine evening," I say then, "and the street was deserted. I thought I would do a *kata* with my *bo*."

"I thought at first that something was attacking you, that I saw something…"

"I am alone," I say, "as you can see."

He opens the door and climbs out. He flicks on a flashlight and shines its beam across the sidewalk, into the doorway.

"Were you setting off fireworks?"

"No."

"There were some sparkles and flashes."

"You must be mistaken."

He sniffs the air. He inspects the sidewalk very closely, then the gutter.

"Strange," he says. "Have you far to go?"

"Not too far."

"Have a good evening."

He gets back into the car. Moments later it is headed up the street.

I continue quickly on my way. I wish to be out of the vicinity before another charge can be built. I also wish to be out of the vicinity simply because being here makes me uneasy.

I am puzzled at the ease with which I was located. What did I do wrong?

"My prints," Hokusai seems to say, after I have reached my destination and drunk too much brandy. "Think, daughter, or they will trap you."

I try, but Fuji is crushing my head, squeezing off thoughts. Epigons dance on his slopes. I pass into a fitful slumber.

In tomorrow's light perhaps I shall see…

14. MT. FUJI FROM MEGURO IN EDO

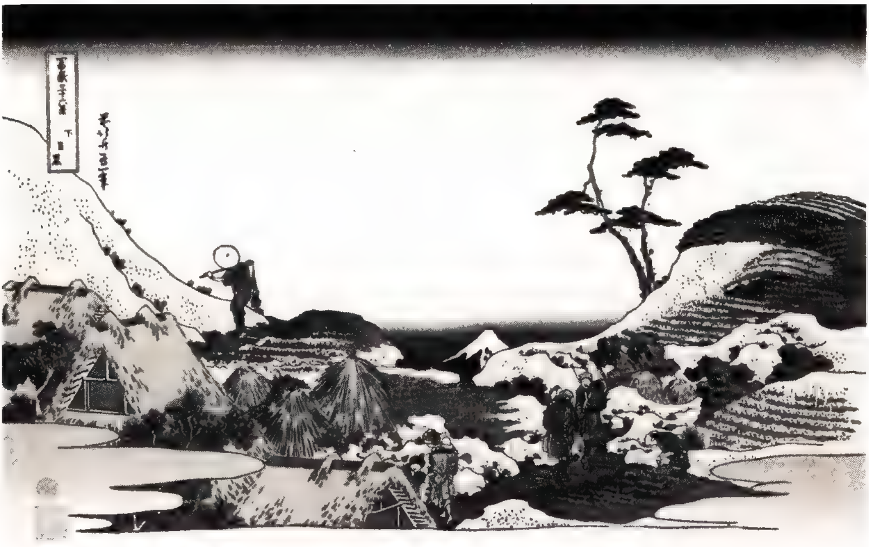
Again, the print is not the reality for me. It shows peasants amid a rustic village, terraced hillsides, a lone tree jutting from the slope of the hill to the right, a snowcapped Fuji partly eclipsed by the base of the rise.

I could not locate anything approximating it, though I do have a partly blocked view of Fuji—blocked in a similar manner, by a slope—from this bench I occupy in a small park. It will do.

Partly blocked, like my thinking. There is something I should be seeing but it is hidden from me. I felt it the moment the epigons appeared, like the devils sent to claim Faust's soul. But I never made a pact with the Devil…just Kit, and it was called marriage. I had no way of knowing how similar it would be.

Now…What puzzles me most is how my location was determined despite my precautions. My head-on encounter must be on my terms, not anyone else's. The reason for this transcends the personal, though I will not deny the involvement of the latter.

In *Hagakure* , Yamamoto Tsunetomo advised that the Way of the Samurai is the Way of Death, that one must live as though one's body were already dead in order to gain full freedom. For me, this attitude is not so difficult to maintain. The freedom part is more complicated, however; when one no longer understands the full nature of the enemy, one's actions are at least partly conditioned by uncertainty.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

My occulted Fuji is still there in his entirety, I know, despite my lack of full visual data. By the same token I ought to be able to extend the lines I have seen thus far with respect to the power which now devils me. Let us return to death. There seems to be something there, though it also seems that there is only so much you can say about it and I already have.

Death…Come gentle…We used to play a parlor game, filling in bizarre causes on imaginary death certificates: "Eaten by the Loch Ness monster." "Stepped on by Godzilla." "Poisoned by a ninja." "Translated."

Kit had stared at me, brow knitting, when I'd offered that last one.

"What do you mean 'translated'?" he asked.

"Okay, you can get me on a technicality," I said, "but I still think the effect would be the same. 'Enoch was translated that he should not see death'—Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, 11:5."

"I don't understand."

"It means to convey directly to heaven without messing around with the customary termination here on earth. Some Moslems believe that the Mahdi was translated."

"An interesting concept," he said. "I'll have to think about it."

Obviously, he did.

I've always thought that Kurosawa could have done a hell of a job with *Don Quixote*. Say there is this old gentleman living in modern times, a scholar, a man who is fascinated by the early days of the samurai and the Code of Bushido. Say that he identifies so strongly with these ideals that one day he loses his senses and comes to believe that he *is* an old time samurai. He dons some ill fitting armor he had collected, takes up his *katana*, goes forth to change the world. Ultimately, he is destroyed by it, but he holds to the Code. That quality of dedication sets him apart and ennobles him, for all of his ludicrousness. I have never felt that Don Quixote was merely a parody of chivalry, especially not after I'd learned that Cervantes had served under Don John of Austria at the battle of Lepanto. For it might be argued that Don John was the last European to be guided by the medieval code of chivalry. Brought up on medieval romances, he had conducted his life along these lines. What did it matter if the medieval knights themselves had not? He believed and he acted on his belief. In anyone else it might simply have been amusing, save that time and circumstance granted him the opportunity to act on several large occasions, and he won. Cervantes could not but have been impressed by his old commander, and who knows how this might have influenced his later literary endeavor? Ortega y Gasset referred to Quixote as a Gothic Christ. Dostoevsky felt the same way about him, and in his attempt to portray a Christ-figure in Prince Myshkin he, too, felt that madness was a necessary precondition for this state in modern times.

All of which is preamble to stating my belief that Kit was at least partly mad. But he was no Gothic Christ. An Electronic Buddha would be much closer.

"Does the data-net have the Buddha-nature?" he asked me one day.

"Sure," I said. "Doesn't everything?" Then I saw the look in his eyes and added, "How the hell should I know?"

He grunted then and reclined his resonance couch, lowered the induction helmet, and continued his computer augmented analysis of a Lucifer cipher with a 128 bit key. Theoretically, it would take thousands of years to crack it by brute force, but the answer was needed within two weeks. His nervous system coupled with the data-net, he was able to deliver.

I did not notice his breathing patterns for some time. It was not until later that I came to realize that after he had finished his work, he would meditate for increasingly long periods of time while still joined with the system.

When I realized this, I chided him for being too lazy to turn the thing off.

He smiled.

"The flow," he said. "You do not fixate at one point. You go with the flow."

"You could throw the switch before you go with the flow and cut down on our electric bill."

He shook his head, still smiling.

"But it is that particular flow that I am going with. I am getting farther and farther into it. You should try it sometime. There have been moments when I felt I could translate myself into it."

"Linguistically or theologically?"

"Both," he replied.

And one night he did indeed go with the flow. I found him in the morning—sleeping, I thought—in his resonance couch, the helmet still in place. This time, at least, he had shut down our terminal. I let him rest. I had no idea how late he might have been working. By evening, though, I was beginning to grow concerned and I tried to rouse him. I could not. He was in a coma.

Later, in the hospital, he showed a flat EEG. His breathing had grown extremely shallow, his blood pressure was very low, his pulse feeble. He continued to decline during the next two days. The doctors gave him every test they could think of but could determine no cause for his condition. In that he had once signed a document requesting that no heroic measures be taken to prolong his existence should something irreversible take him, he was not hooked up to respirators and pumps and IVs after his heart had stopped beating for the fourth time. The autopsy was unsatisfactory. The death certificate merely showed: "Heart stoppage. Possible cerebrovascular accident." The latter was pure speculation. They had found no sign of it. His organs were not distributed to the needy as he had once requested, for fear of some strange new virus which might be transmitted.

Kit, like Marley, was dead to begin with.

15. MT. FUJI FROM TSUKUDAJIMA IN EDO

Blue sky, a few low clouds, Fuji across the bay's bright water, a few boats and an islet between us. Again, dismissing time's changes, I find considerable congruence with reality. Again, I sit within a small boat. Here, however, I've no desire to dive beneath the waves

Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

in search of sunken splendor or to sample the bacteria-count with my person.

My passage to this place was direct and without incident. Preoccupied I came. Preoccupied I remain. My vitality remains high. My health is no worse. My concerns also remain the same, which means that my major question is still unanswered.

At least I feel safe out here on the water. "Safe," though, is a relative term. "Safer" then, than I felt ashore and passing among possible places of ambush. I have not really felt safe since that day after my return from the hospital…

I was tired when I got back home, following several sleepless nights. I went directly to bed. I did not even bother to note the hour, so I have no idea how long I slept.

I was awakened in the dark by what seemed to be the ringing of the telephone. Sleepily, I reached for the instrument, then realized that it was not actually ringing. Had I been dreaming? I sat up in bed. I rubbed my eyes. I stretched. Slowly, the recent past filled my mind and I knew that I would not sleep again for a time. A cup of tea, I decided, might serve me well now. I rose, to go to the kitchen and heat some water.

As I passed through the work area, I saw that one of the CRTs for our terminal was lit. I could not recall its having been on but I moved to turn it off.

I saw then that its switch was not turned on. Puzzled, I looked again at the screen and for the first time realized that there was a display present:

MARI.
ALL IS WELL.
I AM TRANSLATED.
USE THE COUCH AND THE HELMET.
KIT

I felt my fingers digging into my cheeks and my chest was tight from breath retained. Who had done this? How? Was it perhaps some final delirious message left by Kit himself before he went under?

I reached out and flipped the ON-OFF switch back and forth several times, leaving it finally in the OFF position.

The display faded but the light remained on. Shortly, a new display was flashed upon the screen:

YOU READ ME. GOOD.
IT IS ALL RIGHT. I LIVE.
I HAVE ENTERED THE DATA-NET.
SIT ON THE COUCH AND USE THE HELMET.
I WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING.

I ran from the room. In the bathroom I threw up, several times. Then I sat upon the toilet, shaking. Who would play such a horrible joke upon me? I drank several glasses of water and waited for my trembling to subside.

When it had, I went directly to the kitchen, made the tea, and drank some. My thoughts settled slowly into the channels of analysis. I considered possibilities. The one that seemed more likely than most was that Kit had left a message for me and that my use of the induction interface gear would trigger its delivery. I wanted that message, whatever it might be, but I did not know whether I possessed sufficient emotional fortitude to receive it at the moment.

I must have sat there for the better part of an hour. I looked out the window once and saw that the sky was growing light. I put down my cup. I returned to the work area.

The screen was still lit. The message, though, had changed:

DO NOT BE AFRAID.
SIT ON THE COUCH AND USE THE HELMET.

THEN YOU WILL UNDERSTAND.

I crossed to the couch. I sat on it and reclined it. I lowered the helmet. At first there was nothing but field noise.

Then I felt his presence, a thing difficult to describe in a world customarily filled only with data flows. I waited. I tried to be receptive to whatever he had somehow left imprinted for me.

"I am not a recording, Mari," he seemed to say to me then. "I am really here."

I resisted the impulse to flee. I had worked hard for this composure and I meant to maintain it.

"I made it over," he seemed to say. "I have entered the net. I am spread out through many places. It is pure kundalini. I am nothing but flow. It is wonderful. I will be forever here. It is nirvana."

"It really is you," I said.

"Yes. I have translated myself. I want to show you what it means."

"Very well."

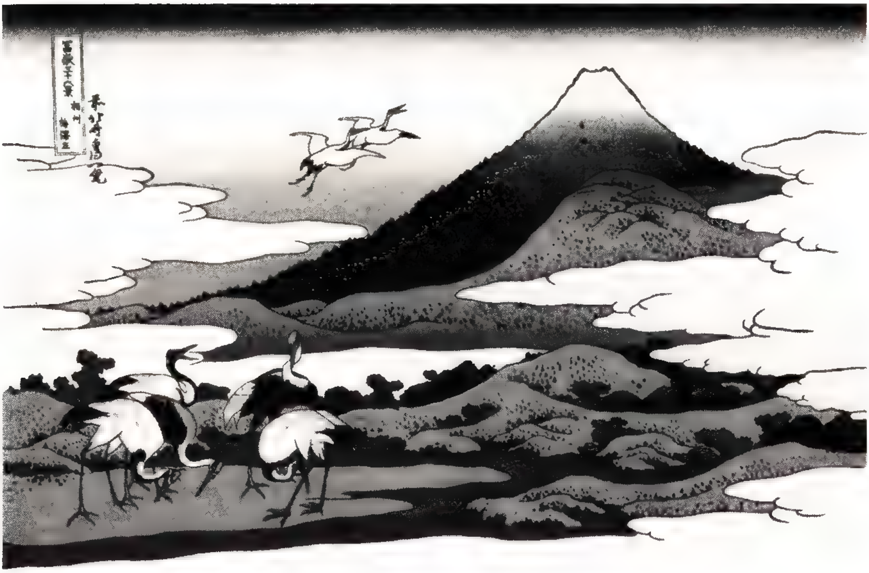
"I am gathered here now. Open the legs of your mind and let me in fully."

I relaxed and he flowed into me. Then I was borne away and I understood.

16. MT. FUJI FROM UMEZAWA

Fuji across lava fields and wisps of fog, drifting clouds; birds on the wing and birds on the ground. This one at least is close. I lean on my staff and stare at his peaceful reaches across the chaos. The lesson is like that of a piece of music: I am strengthened in some fashion I cannot describe.

And I had seen blossoming cherry trees on the way over here, and fields purple with clover, cultivated fields yellow with rape blossoms, grown for its oil, a few winter camellias still holding forth their reds and pinks, the green shoots of rice beds, here and there a tulip tree dashed with white, blue mountains in the distance, foggy river valleys. I had passed villages where colored sheet metal now covers the roofs' thatching—blue and yellow, green, black, red—and yards filled with the slate blue rocks so fine for landscape gardening; an occasional cow, munching, lowing softly; scarlike rows of plastic covered mulberry bushes where the silkworms are bred. My heart jogged at the sights—the tiles, the little bridges, the color… It was like entering a tale by Lafcadio Hearn, to have come back.


冨嶽三十六景 相州 梅澤左
前北斎為一筆

Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

My mind was drawn back along the path I had followed, to the points of its intersection with my electronic bane. Hokusai's warning that night I drank too much—that his prints may trap me—could well be correct. Kit had anticipated my passage a number of times. How could he have?

Then it struck me. My little book of Hokusai's prints—a small cloth-bound volume by the Charles E. Tuttle Company—had been a present from Kit.

It is possible that he was expecting me in Japan at about this time, because of Osaka. Once his epigons had spotted me a couple of times, probably in a massive scanning of terminals, could he have correlated my movements with the sequence of the prints in *Hokusai's Views of Mt. Fuji*, for which he knew my great fondness, and simply extrapolated and waited? I've a strong feeling that the answer is in the affirmative.

Entering the data-net with Kit was an overwhelming experience. That my consciousness spread and flowed I do not deny. That I was many places simultaneously, that I rode currents I did not at first understand, that knowledge and transcendence and a kind of glory were all about me and within me was also a fact of peculiar perception. The speed with which I was borne seemed instantaneous, and this was a taste of eternity. The access to multitudes of terminals and enormous memory banks seemed a measure of omniscience. The possibility of the manipulation of whatever I would change within this realm and its consequences at that place where I still felt my distant body seemed a version of omnipotence. And the feeling…I tasted the sweetness, Kit with me and within me. It was self surrendered and recovered in a new incarnation, it was freedom from mundane desire, liberation…

"Stay with me here forever," Kit seemed to say.

"No," I seemed to answer, dreamlike, finding myself changing even further. "I cannot surrender myself so willingly."

"Not for this? For unity and the flow of connecting energy?"

"And this wonderful lack of responsibility?"

"Responsibility? For what? This is pure existence. There is no past."

"Then conscience vanishes."

"What do you need it for? There is no future either."

"Then all actions lose their meaning."

"True. Action is an illusion. Consequence is an illusion."

"And paradox triumphs over reason."

"There is no paradox. All is reconciled."

"Then meaning dies."

"Being is the only meaning."

"Are you certain?"

"Feel it!"

"I do. But it is not enough. Send me back before I am changed into something I do not wish to be."

"What more could you desire than this?"

"My imagination will die, also. I can feel it."

"And what is imagination?"

"A thing born of feeling and reason."

"Does this not feel right?"

"Yes, it feels right. But I do not want that feeling unaccompanied. When I touch feeling with reason, I see that it is sometimes but an excuse for failing to close with complexity."

"You can deal with any complexity here. Behold the data! Does reason not show you that this condition is far superior to that you knew but moments ago?"

"Nor can I trust reason unaccompanied. Reason without feeling has led humanity to enact monstrosities. Do not attempt to disassemble my imagination this way."

"You retain your reason and your feelings!"

"But they are coming unplugged—with this storm of bliss, this shower of data. I need them conjoined, else my imagination is lost."

"Let it be lost, then. It has served its purpose. Be done with it now. What can you imagine that you do not already have here?"

"I cannot yet know, and that is its power. If there be a will with a spark of divinity to it, I know it only through my imagination. I can give you anything else but that I will not surrender."

"And that is all? A wisp of possibility?"

"No. But it alone is too much to deny."

"And my love for you?"

"You no longer love in the human way. Let me go back."

"Of course. You will think about it. You will return."

"Back! Now!"

I pushed the helmet from my head and rose quickly. I returned to the bathroom, then to my bed. I slept as if drugged, for a long while.

Would I have felt differently about possibilities, the future, imagination, had I not been pregnant—a thing I had suspected but not yet mentioned to him, and which he had missed learning with his attention focused upon our argument? I like to think that my answers would have been the same, but I will never know. My condition was confirmed by a local doctor the following day. I made the visit I had been putting off because my life required a certainty of something then—a certainty of anything. The screen in the work area remained blank for three days.

I read and I meditated. Then of an evening the light came on again:

ARE YOU READY?

I activated the keyboard. I typed one word:

NO.

I disconnected the induction couch and its helmet then. I unplugged the unit itself, also.

The telephone rang.

"Hello?" I said.

"Why not?" he asked me.

I screamed and hung up. He had penetrated the phone circuits, appropriated a voice.

It rang again. I answered again.

"You will never know rest until you come to me," he said.

"I will if you will leave me alone," I told him.

"I cannot. You are special to me. I want you with me. I love you."

I hung up. It rang again. I tore the phone from the wall.

I had known that I would have to leave soon. I was overwhelmed and depressed by all the reminders of our life together. I packed quickly and I departed. I took a room at a hotel. As soon as I was settled into it, the telephone rang and it was Kit again. My registration had gone into a computer and…

I had them disconnect my phone at the switchboard. I put out a Do Not Disturb sign. In the morning I saw a telegram protruding from beneath the door. From Kit. He wanted to talk to me.

I determined to go far away. To leave the country, to return to the States.

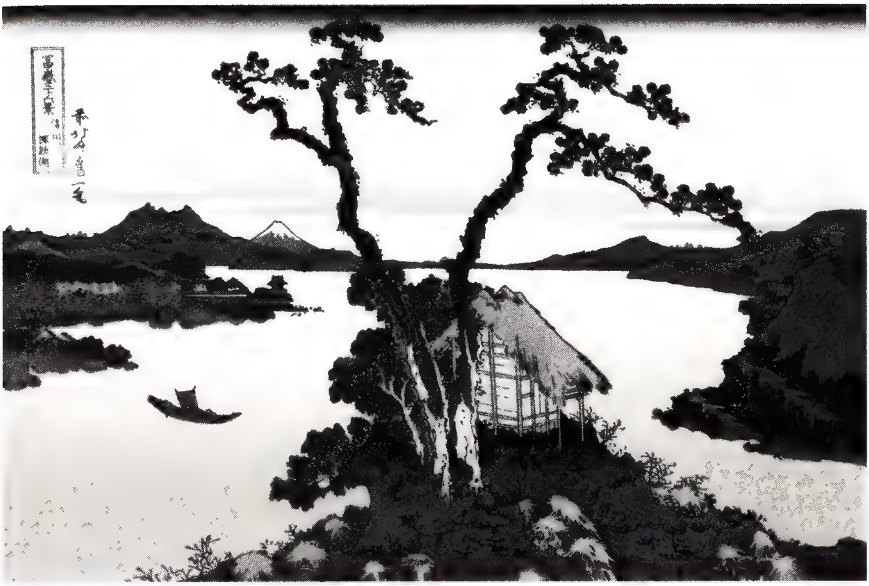
It was easy for him to follow me. We leave electronic tracks almost everywhere. By cable, satellite, optic fiber he could be wherever he chose. Like an unwanted suitor now he pestered me with calls, interrupted television shows to flash messages upon the screen, broke in on my own calls, to friends, lawyers, realtors, stores. Several times, horribly, he even sent me flowers. My electric bodhisattva, my hound of heaven, would give me no rest. It is a terrible thing to be married to a persistent data-net.

So I settled in the country. I would have nothing in my home whereby he could reach me. I studied ways of avoiding the system, of slipping past his many senses.

On those few occasions when I was careless he reached for me again immediately. Only he had learned a new trick, and I became convinced that he had developed it for the purpose of taking me into his world by force. He could build up a charge at a terminal, mold it into something like ball lightning and animallike, and send that short-lived artifact a little distance to do his will. I learned its weakness, though, in a friend's home when one came for me, shocked me, and attempted to propel me into the vicinity of the terminal, presumably for purposes of translation. I struck at the epigon—as Kit later referred to it in a telegram of explanation and apology—with the nearest object to hand—a lighted table lamp, which entered its field and blew a circuit immediately. The epigon was destroyed, which is how I discovered that a slight electrical disruption created an instability within the things.

I stayed in the country and raised my daughter. I read and I practiced my martial arts and I walked in the woods and climbed mountains and sailed and camped: rural occupations all, and very satisfying to me after a life of intrigue, conflict, plot and counterplot, violence, and then that small, temporary island of security with Kit. I was happy with my choice.

Fuji across the lava beds…Springtime…Now I am returned. This was not my choice.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

17. MT. FUJI FROM LAKE SUWA

And so I come to Lake Suwa, Fuji resting small in the evening distance. It is no Kamaguchi of powerful reflections for me. But it is serene, which joins my mood in a kind of peace. I have taken the life of the spring into me now and it has spread through my being. Who would disrupt this world, laying unwanted forms upon it? Seal your lips.

Was it not in a quiet province where Bōtchan found his maturity? I've a theory concerning books like that one of Natsume Soseki's. Someone once told me that this is the one book you can be sure that every educated Japanese has read. So I read it. In the States I was told that *Huckleberry Finn* was the one book you could be sure that every educated Yankee had read. So I read it. In Canada it was Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town.* In France it was *Le Grand Meaulnes.* Other countries have their books of this sort. They are all of them pastorals, having in common a closeness to the countryside and the forces of nature in days just before heavy urbanization and mechanization. These things are on the horizon and advancing, but they only serve to add the spice of poignancy to the taste of simpler values. They are youthful books, of national heart and character, and they deal with the passing of innocence. I have given many of them to Kendra.

I lied to Boris. Of course I know all about the Osaka Conference. I was even approached by one of my former employers to do something along the lines Boris had guessed at. I declined. My plans are my own. There would have been a conflict.

Hokusai, ghost and mentor, you understand chance and purpose better than Kit. You know that human order must color our transactions with the universe, and that this is not only necessary but good, and that the light still comes through.

Upon this rise above the water's side I withdraw my hidden blade and hone it once again. The sun falls away from my piece of the world, but the darkness, too, is here my friend.

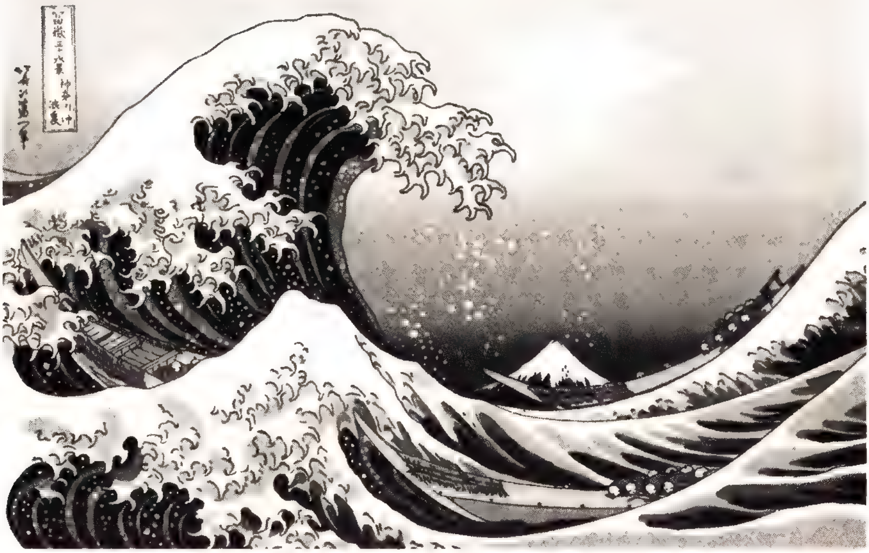
18. MT. FUJI FROM THE OFFING IN KANAGAWA

And so the image of death. The Big Wave, curling above, toppling upon, about to engulf the fragile vessels. The one print of Hokusai's that everyone knows.

I am no surfer. I do not seek the perfect wave. I will simply remain here upon the shore and watch the water. It is enough of a reminder. My pilgrimage winds down, though the end is not yet in sight.

Well…I see Fuji. Call Fuji the end. As with the barrel's hoop of the first print, the circle closes about him.

On my way to this place I halted in a small glade I came upon and bathed myself in a stream which ran through it. There I used the local wood to construct a low altar. Cleansing my hands each step of the way I set before it incense made from camphorwood and from white sandalwood; I also placed there a bunch of fresh violets, a cup of vegetables, and a cup of fresh water from the stream. Then I lit a lamp I had purchased and filled with rape seed oil. Upon the altar I set my image of the god Kokuzo which I had brought with me from home, facing to the west where I stood. I washed again, then extended my right hand, middle finger bent to touch my thumb as I spoke the mantra for invoking Kokuzo. I drank some of the water. I lustrated myself with sprinklings of it and continued repetition of the mantra. Thereafter, I made the gesture of Kokuzo three times, hand to the crown of my head, to my right shoulder, left shoulder, heart and throat. I removed the white cloth in which Kokuzo's picture had been wrapped. When I had sealed the area with the proper repetitions, I meditated in the same position as Kokuzo in the picture and invoked him. After a time the mantra ran by itself, over and over.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

Finally, there was a vision, and I spoke, telling all that had happened, all that I intended to do, and asking for strength and guidance. Suddenly, I saw his sword descending, descending like slow lightning, to sever a limb from a tree, which began to bleed. And then it was raining, both within the vision and upon me, and I knew that that was all to be had on the matter.

I wound things up, cleaned up, donned my poncho, and headed on my way.

The rain was heavy, my boots grew muddy, and the temperature dropped. I trudged on for a long while and the cold crept into my bones. My toes and fingers became numb.

I kept constant lookout for a shelter, but did not spot anyplace where I could take refuge from the storm. Later, it changed from a downpour to a drizzle to a weak, mistlike fall when I saw what could be a temple or shrine in the distance. I headed for it, hoping for some hot tea, a fire, and a chance to change my socks and clean my boots.

A priest stopped me at the gate. I told him my situation and he looked uncomfortable.

"It is our custom to give shelter to anyone," he said. "But there is a problem."

"I will be happy to make a cash donation," I said, "if too many others have passed this way and reduced your stores. I really just wanted to get warm."

"Oh no, it is not a matter of supplies," he told me, "and for that matter very few have been by here recently. The problem is of a different sort and it embarrasses me to state it. It makes us sound old fashioned and superstitious, when actually this is a very modern temple. But recently we have been—ah—haunted."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Bestial apparitions have been coming and going from the library and record room beside the head priest's quarters. They stalk the shrine, pass through our rooms, pace the grounds, then return to the library or else fade away."

He studied my face, as if seeking derision, belief, disbelief—anything. I merely nodded.

"It is most awkward," he added. "A few simple exorcisms have been attempted but to no avail."

"For how long has this been going on?" I asked.

"For about three days," he replied.

"Has anyone been harmed by them?"

"No. They are very intimidating, but no one has been injured. They are distracting, too, when one is trying to sleep—that is, to meditate—for they produce a tingling feeling and sometimes cause the hair to rise up."

"Interesting," I said. "Are there many of them?"

"It varies. Usually just one. Sometimes two. Occasionally three."

"Does your library by any chance contain a computer terminal?"

"Yes, it does," he answered. "As I said, we are very modern. We keep our records with it, and we can obtain printouts of sacred texts we do not have on hand—and other things."

"If you will shut the terminal down for a day, they will probably go away," I told him, "and I do not believe they will return."

"I would have to check with my superior before doing a thing like that. You know something of these matters?"

"Yes, and in the meantime I would still like to warm myself, if I may."

"Very well. Come this way."

I followed him, cleaning my boots and removing them before entering. He led me around to the rear and into an attractive room which looked upon the temple's garden.

"I will go and see that a meal is prepared for you, and a brazier of charcoal that you may warm yourself," he said as he excused himself.

Left by myself I admired the golden carp drifting in a pond only a few feet away, its surface occasionally punctuated by raindrops, and a little stone bridge which crossed the pond, a stone pagoda, paths wandering among stones and shrubs. I wanted to cross that bridge—how unlike that metal span, thrusting, cold and dark!—and lose myself there for an age or two. Instead, I sat down and gratefully gulped the tea which arrived moments later, and I warmed my feet and dried my socks in the heat of the brazier which came a little while after that.

Later, I was halfway through a meal and enjoying a conversation with the young priest, who had been asked to keep me company until the head priest could come by and personally welcome me, when I saw my first epigon of the day.

It resembled a very small, triple trunked elephant walking upright along one of the twisting garden paths, sweeping the air to either side of the trail with those snakelike appendages. It had not yet spotted me.

I called it to the attention of the priest, who was not faced in that direction.

"Oh my!" he said, fingering his prayer beads.

While he was looking that way, I shifted my staff into a readily available position beside me.

As it drifted nearer, I hurried to finish my rice and vegetables. I was afraid my bowl might be upset in the skirmish soon to come.

The priest glanced back when he heard the movement of the staff along the flagstones.

"You will not need that," he said. "As I explained, these demons are not aggressive."

I shook my head as I swallowed another mouthful.

"This one will attack," I said, "when it becomes aware of my presence. You see, I am the one it is seeking."

"Oh my!" he repeated.

I stood then as its trunks swayed in my direction and it approached the bridge.

"This one is more solid than usual," I commented. "Three days, eh?"

"Yes."

I moved about the tray and took a step forward. Suddenly, it was over the bridge and rushing toward me. I met it with a straight thrust, which it avoided. I spun the staff twice and struck again as it was turning. My blow landed and I was hit by two of the trunks simultaneously—once on the breast, once on the cheek. The epigon went out like a burned hydrogen balloon and I stood there rubbing my face, looking about me the while.

Another slithered into our room from within the temple. I lunged suddenly and caught it on the first stroke.

"I think perhaps I should be leaving now," I stated. "Thank you for your hospitality. Convey my regrets to the head priest that I did not get to meet him. I am warm and fed and I have learned what I wanted to know about your demons. Do not even bother about the terminal. They will probably cease to visit you shortly, and they should not return."

"You are certain?"

"I know them."

"I did not know the terminals were haunted. The salesman did not tell us."

"Yours should be all right now."

He saw me to the gate.

"Thank you for the exorcism," he said.

"Thanks for the meal. Good-bye."

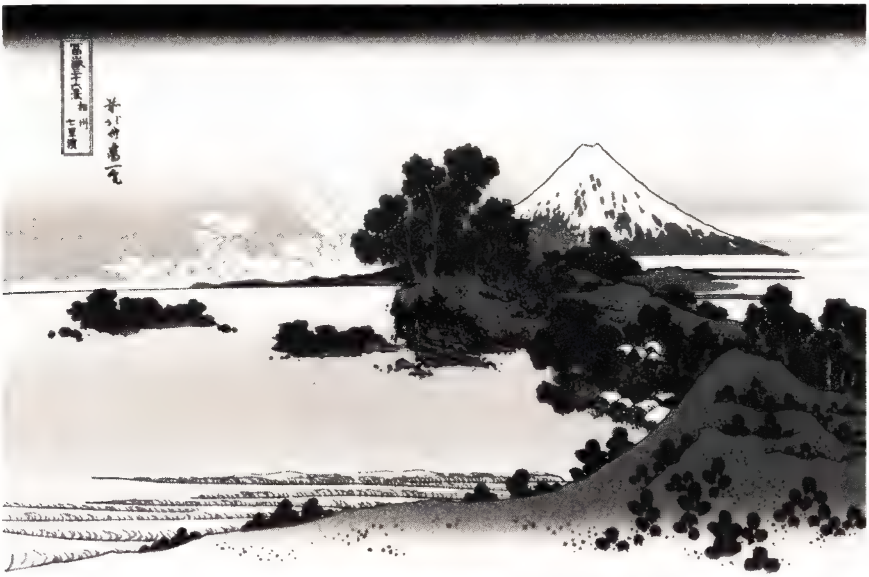
I traveled for several hours before I found a place to camp in a shallow cave, using my poncho as a rain screen.

And today I came here to watch for the wave of death. Not yet, though. No truly big ones in this sea. Mine is still out there, somewhere.

19. MT. FUJI FROM SHICHIRIGAHAMA

Fuji past pine trees, through shadow, clouds rising beside him… It is getting on into the evening of things. The weather was good today, my health stable.

I met two monks upon the road yesterday and I traveled with them for a time. I was certain that I had seen them somewhere else along the way, so I greeted them and asked if this were possible. They said that they were on a pilgrimage of their own, to a distant shrine, and they admitted that I looked familiar, also. We took our lunch together at the side of the road. Our conversation was restricted



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

to generalities, though they did ask me whether I had heard of the haunted shrine in Kanagawa. How quickly such news travels. I said that I had and we reflected upon its strangeness.

After a time I became annoyed. Every turning of the way that I took seemed a part of their route, also. While I'd welcomed a little company, I'd no desire for long-term companions, and it seemed their choices of ways approximated mine too closely. Finally, when we came to a split in the road I asked them which fork they were taking. They hesitated, then said that they were going right. I took the left-hand path. A little later they caught up with me. They had changed their minds, they said.

When we reached the next town, I offered a man in a car a good sum of money to drive me to the next village. He accepted, and we drove away and left them standing there.

I got out before we reached the next town, paid him, and watched him drive off. Then I struck out upon a footpath I had seen, going in the general direction I desired. At one point I left the trail and cut through the woods until I struck another path.

I camped far off the trail when I finally bedded down, and the following morning I took pains to erase all sign of my presence there.

The monks did not reappear. They may have been quite harmless, or their designs quite different, but I must be true to my carefully cultivated paranoia.

Which leads me to note that man in the distance—a Westerner, I'd judge, by his garments… He has been hanging around taking pictures for some time. I will lose him shortly, of course, if he is following me—or even if he isn't.

It is terrible to have to be this way for too long a period of time. Next I will be suspecting schoolchildren.

I watch Fuji as the shadows lengthen. I will continue to watch until the first star appears. Then I will slip away.

And so I see the sky darken. The photographer finally stows his gear and departs.

I remain alert, but when I see the first star, I join the shadows and fade like the day.

20. MT. FUJI FROM INUME PASS

Through fog and above it. It rained a bit earlier. And there is Fuji, storm clouds above his brow. In many ways I am surprised to have made it this far. This view, though, makes everything worthwhile.

I sit upon a mossy rock and record in my mind the changing complexion of Fuji as a quick rain veils his countenance, ceases, begins again.

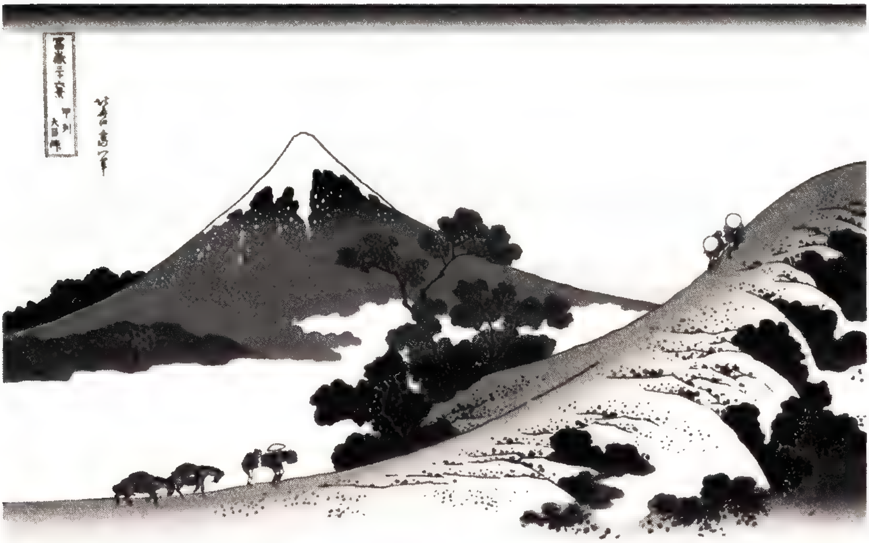
The winds are strong here. The fogbank raises ghostly limbs and lowers them. There is a kind of numb silence beneath the wind's monotone mantra.

I make myself comfortable, eating, drinking, viewing, as I go over my final plans once again. Things wind down. Soon the circle will be closed.

I had thought of throwing away my medicine here as an act of bravado, as a sign of full commitment. I see this now as a foolishly romantic gesture. I am going to need all of my strength, all of the help I can get, if I am to have a chance at succeeding. Instead of discarding the medicine here I take some.

The winds feel good upon me. They come on like waves, but they are bracing.

A few travelers pass below. I draw back, out of their line of sight.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

Harmless, they go by like ghosts, their words carried off by the wind, not even reaching this far. I feel a small desire to sing but I restrain myself.

I sit for a long while, lost in a reverie of the elements. It has been good, this journey into the past, living at the edge once again…

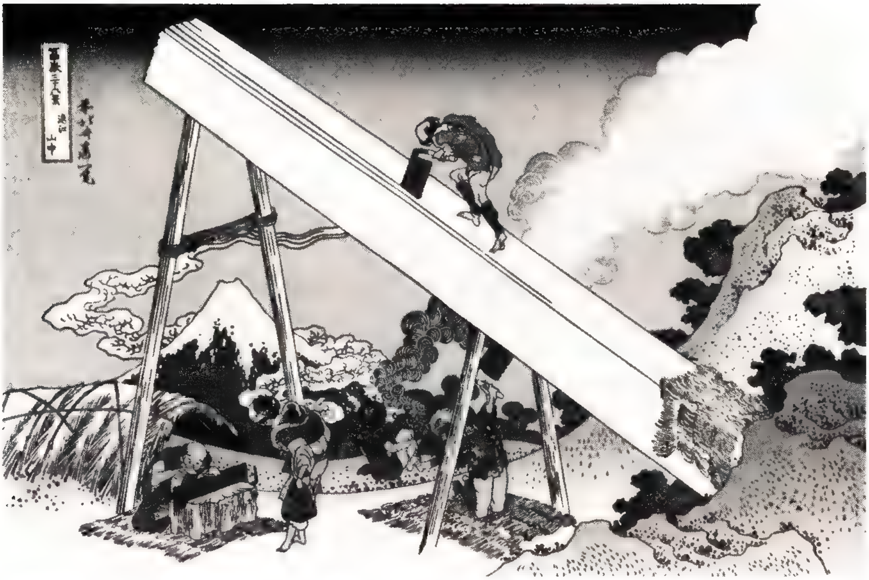
Below me. Another vaguely familiar figure comes into view, lugging equipment. I cannot distinguish features from here, nor need I. As he halts and begins to set up his gear, I know that it is the photographer of Shichirigahama, out to capture another view of Fuji more permanent than any I desire.

I watch him for a time and he does not even glance my way. Soon I will be gone again, without his knowledge. I will allow this one as a coincidence. Provisionally, of course. If I see him again, I may have to kill him. I will be too near my goal to permit even the possibility of interference to exist.

I had better depart now, for I would rather travel before than behind him.

Fuji-from-on-high, this was a good resting place. We will see you again soon.

Come, Hokusai, let us be gone.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

21. MT. FUJI FROM THE TOTOMI MOUNTAINS

Gone the old sawyers, splitting boards from a beam, shaping them. Only Fuji, of snow and clouds, remains. The men in the print work in the old way, like the Owari barrel maker. Yet, apart from those of the fishermen who merely draw their needs from nature, these are the only two prints in my book depicting people actively shaping something in their world. Their labors are too traditional for me to see the image of the Virgin and the Dynamo within them. They could have been performing the same work a thousand years before Hokusai.

Yet it is a scene of humanity shaping the world, and so it leads me down trails of years to this time, this day of sophisticated tools and large scale changes. I see within it the image of what was later wrought, of the metal skin and pulsing flows the world would come to wear. And Kit is there, too, godlike, riding electronic waves.

Troubling. Yet bespeaking an ancient resilience, as if this, too, is but an eyeblink glimpse of humanity's movement in time, and whether I win or lose, the raw stuff remains and will triumph ultimately over any obstacle. I would really like to believe this, but I must leave certainty to politicians and preachers. My way is laid out and invested with my vision of what must be done.

I have not seen the photographer again, though I caught sight of the monks yesterday, camped on the side of a distant hill. I inspected them with my telescope and they were the same ones with whom I had traveled briefly. They had not noticed me and I passed them by way of a covering detour. Our trails have not crossed since.

Fuji, I have taken twenty-one of your aspects within me now. Live a little, die a little. Tell the gods, if you think of it, that a world is about to die.

I hike on, camping early in a field close to a monastery. I do not wish to enter there after my last experience in a modern holy place. I bed down in a concealed spot nearby, amid rocks and pine tree shoots. Sleep comes easily, lasts till some odd hour.

I am awake suddenly and trembling, in darkness and stillness. I cannot recall a sound from without or a troubling dream from within. Yet I am afraid, even to move. I breathe carefully and wait.

Drifting, like a lotus on a pond, it has come up beside me, towers above me, wears stars like a crown, glows with its own milky, supernal light. It is a delicate featured image of a bodhisattva, not unlike Kwannon, in garments woven of moonbeams.

"Mari."

Its voice is soft and caressing.

"Yes?" I answer.

"You have returned to travel in Japan. You are coming to me, are you not?"

The illusion is broken. It is Kit. He has carefully sculpted this epigon-form and wears it himself to visit me. There must be a terminal in the monastery. Will he try to force me?

"I was on my way to see you, yes," I manage.

"You may join me now, if you would."

He extends a wonderfully formed hand, as in benediction.

"I've a few small matters I must clear up before we are reunited."

"What could be more important? I have seen the medical reports. I know the condition of your body. It would be tragic if you were to die upon the road, this close to your exaltation. Come now."

"You have waited this long, and time means little to you."

"It is you that I am concerned with."

"I assure you I shall take every precaution. In the meantime, there is something which has been troubling me."

"Tell me."

"Last year there was a revolution in Saudi Arabia. It seemed to promise well for the Saudis but it also threatened Japan's oil supply.

Suddenly the new government began to look very bad on paper, and a new counterrevolutionary group looked stronger and better-tempered than it actually was. Major powers intervened successfully on the side of the counterrevolutionaries. Now they are in power and they seem even worse than the first government which had been overthrown. It seems possible, though incomprehensible to most, that computer readouts all over the world were somehow made to be misleading. And now the Osaka Conference is to be held to work out new oil agreements with the latest regime. It looks as if Japan will get a very good deal out of it. You once told me that you are above such mundane matters, but I wonder? You are Japanese, you loved your country. Could you have intervened in this?"

"What if I did? It is such a small matter in the light of eternal values. If there is a touch of sentiment for such things remaining within me, it is not dishonorable that I favor my country and my people."

"And if you did it in this, might you not be moved to intervene again one day, in some other matter where habit or sentiment tell you you should?"

"What of it?" he replies. "I but extend my finger and stir the dust of illusion a bit. If anything, it frees me even further."

"I see," I answer.

"I doubt that you do, but you will when you have joined me. Why not do it now?"

"Soon," I say. "Let me settle my affairs."

"I will give you a few more days," he says, "and then you must be with me forever."

I bow my head.

"I will see you again soon," I tell him.

"Good night, my love."

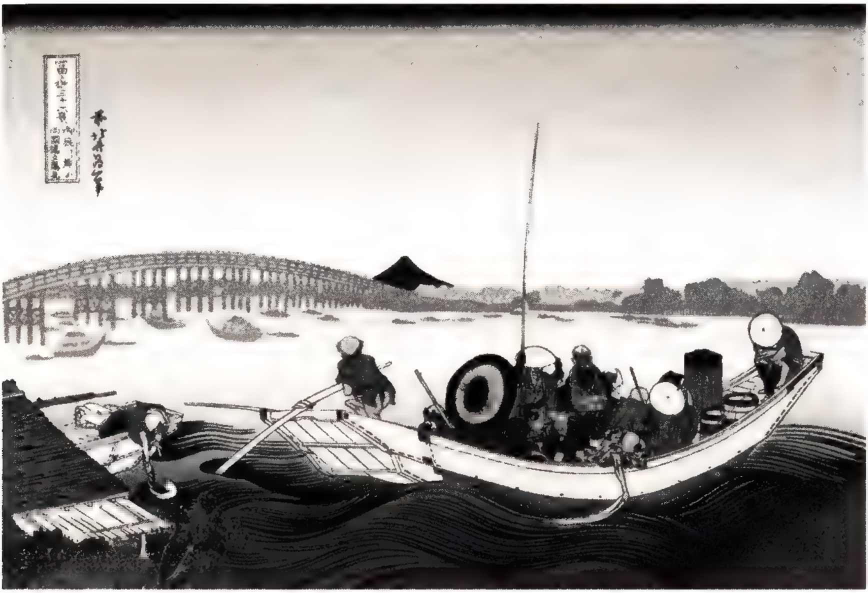
"Good night."

He drifts away then, his feet not touching the ground, and he passes through the wall of the monastery.

I reach for my medicine and my brandy. A double dose of each…

22. MT. FUJI FROM THE SUMIDA RIVER IN EDO

And so I come to the place of crossing. The print shows a ferryman bearing a number of people across the river into the city and evening. Fuji lies dark and brooding in the farthest distance. Here I



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

do think of Charon, but the thought is not so unwelcome as it once might have been. I take the bridge myself, though.

As Kit has promised me a little grace, I walk freely the bright streets, to smell the smells and hear the noises and watch the people going their ways. I wonder what Hokusai would have done in contemporary times? He is silent on the matter.

I drink a little, I smile occasionally, I even eat a good meal. I am tired of reliving my life. I seek no consolations of philosophy or literature. Let me merely walk in the city tonight, running my shadow over faces and storefronts, bars and theaters, temples and offices. Anything which approaches is welcome tonight. I eat *sushi,* I gamble, I dance. There is no yesterday, there is no tomorrow for me now. When a man places his hand upon my shoulder and smiles, I move it to my breast and laugh. He is good for an hour's exercise and laughter in a small room he finds us. I make him cry out several times before I leave him, though he pleads with me to stay. Too much to do and see, love. A greeting and a farewell.

Walking… Through parks, alleys, gardens, plazas. Crossing… Small bridges and larger ones, streets and walkways. Bark, dog. Shout, child. Weep, woman. I come and go among you. I feel you with a dispassionate passion. I take all of you inside me that I may hold the world here, for a night.

I walk in a light rain and in its cool aftermath. My garments are damp, then dry again. I visit a temple. I pay a taximan to drive me about the town. I eat a late meal. I visit another bar. I come upon a deserted playground, where I swing and watch the stars.

And I stand before a fountain splaying its waters into the lightening sky, until the stars are gone and only their lost sparkling falls about me.

Then breakfast and a long sleep, another breakfast and a longer one…

And you, my father, there on the sad height? I must leave you soon, Hokusai.

23. MT. FUJI FROM EDO

Walking again, within a cloudy evening. How long has it been since I spoke with Kit? Too long, I am sure. An epigon could come bounding my way at any moment.

I have narrowed my search to three temples—none of them the one in the print, to be sure, only that uppermost portion of it viewed from that impossible angle, Fuji back past its peak, smoke, clouds, fog between—but I've a feeling one of these three will do in the blue of evening.

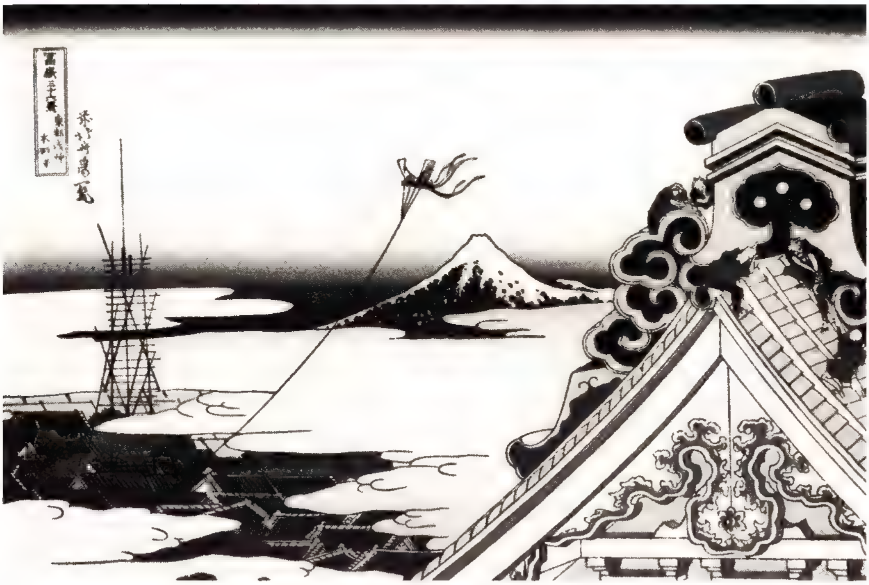
I have passed all of them many times, like a circling bird. I am loath to do more than this, for I feel the right choice will soon be made for me. I became aware sometime back that I was being followed, really followed this time, on my rounds. It seems that my worst fear was not ungrounded; Kit is employing human agents as well as epigons. How he sought them and how he bound them to his service I do not care to guess. Who else would be following me at this point, to see that I keep my promise, to force me to it if necessary?

I slow my pace. But whoever is behind me does the same. Not yet. Very well.

Fog rolls in. The echoes of my footfalls are muffled. Also those at my back. Unfortunate.

I head for the other temple. I slow again when I come into its vicinity, all of my senses extended, alert.

Nothing. No one. It is all right. Time is no problem. I move on.



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

After a long while I approach the precincts of the third temple. This must be it, but I require some move from my pursuer to give me the sign. Then, of course, I must deal with that person before I make my own move. I hope that it will not be too difficult, for everything will turn upon that small conflict.

I slow yet again and nothing appears but the moisture of the fog upon my face and the knuckles of my hand wrapped about my staff. I halt. I seek in my pocket after a box of cigarettes I had purchased several days ago in my festive mood. I had doubted they would shorten my life.

As I raise one to my lips, I hear the words, "You desire a light, madam?"

I nod my head as I turn.

It is one of the two monks who extends a lighter to me and flicks forth its flame. I notice for the first time the heavy ridge of callus along the edge of his hand. He had kept it carefully out of sight before, as we sojourned together. The other monk appears to his rear, to his left.

"Thank you."

I inhale and send smoke to join the fog.

"You have come a long way," the man states.

"Yes."

"And your pilgrimage has come to an end."

"Oh? Here?"

He smiles and nods. He turns his head toward the temple.

"This is our temple," he says, "where we worship the new bodhisattva. He awaits you within."

"He can continue to wait, till I finish my cigarette," I say.

"Of course."

With a casual glance, I study the man. He is probably a very good *karateka*. I am very good with the *bo*. If it were only him, I would bet on myself. But two of them, and the other probably just as good as this one? Kokuzo, where is your sword? I am suddenly afraid.

I turn away, I drop the cigarette, I spin into my attack. He is ready, of course. No matter. I land the first blow.

By then, however, the other man is circling and I must wheel and move defensively, turning, turning. If this goes on for too long, they will be able to wear me down.

I hear a grunt as I connect with a shoulder. Something, anyway…

Slowly, I am forced to give way, to retreat toward the temple wall. If I am driven too near it, it will interfere with my strokes. I try again to hold my ground, to land a decisive blow…

Suddenly, the man to my right collapses, a dark figure on his back. No time to speculate. I turn my attention to the first monk, and moments later I land another blow, then another.

My rescuer is not doing so well, however. The second monk has shaken him off and begins striking at him with bone-crushing blows. My ally knows something of unarmed combat, though, for he gets into a defensive stance and blocks many of these, even landing a few of his own. Still, he is clearly overmatched.

Finally I sweep a leg and deliver another shoulder blow. I try three strikes at my man while he is down, but he rolls away from all of them and comes up again. I hear a sharp cry from my right, but I cannot look away from my adversary.

He comes in again and this time I catch him with a sudden reversal and crush his temple with a follow up. I spin then, barely in time, for my ally lies on the ground and the second monk is upon me.

Either I am lucky or he has been injured. I catch the man quickly and follow up with a rapid series of strikes which take him down, out, and out for good.

I rush to the side of the third man and kneel beside him, panting. I had seen his gold earring as I moved about the second monk.

"Boris." I take his hand. "Why are you here?"

"I told you—I could take a few days—to help you," he says, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "Found you. Was taking pictures...And see...You needed me."

"I'm sorry," I say. "Grateful, but sorry. You're a better man than I thought."

He squeezes my hand. "I told you I liked you—Maryushka. Too bad...we didn't have—more time..."

I lean and kiss him, getting blood on my mouth. His hand relaxes within my own. I've never been a good judge of people, except after the fact.

And so I rise. I leave him there on the wet pavement. There is nothing I can do for him. I go into the temple.

It is dark near the entrance, but there are many votive lights to the rear. I do not see anyone about. I did not think that I would. It was just to have been the two monks, ushering me to the terminal. I head toward the lights. It must be somewhere back there.

I hear rain on the rooftop as I search. There are little rooms, off to either side, behind the lights.

It is there, in the second one. And even as I cross the threshold, I feel that familiar ionization which tells me that Kit is doing something here.

I rest my staff against the wall and go nearer. I place my hand upon the humming terminal.

"Kit," I say, "I have come."

No epigon grows before me, but I feel his presence and he seems to speak to me as he did on that night so long ago when I lay back upon the couch and donned the helmet:

"I knew that you would be here tonight."

"So did I," I reply.

"All of your business is finished?"

"Most of it."

"And you are ready now to be joined with me?"

"Yes."

Again I feel that movement, almost sexual in nature, as he flows into me. In a moment he would bear me away into his kingdom.

Tatemae is what you show to others. *Honne* is your real intention. As Musashi cautioned in the *Book of Waters*, I try not to reveal my *honne* even at this moment. I simply reach out with my free hand and topple my staff so that its metal tip, batteries engaged, falls against the terminal.

"Mari! What have you done?" he asks, within me now, as the humming ceases.

"I have cut off your line of retreat, Kit."

"Why?"

The blade is already in my hand.

"It is the only way for us. I give you this *jigai*, my husband."

"No!"

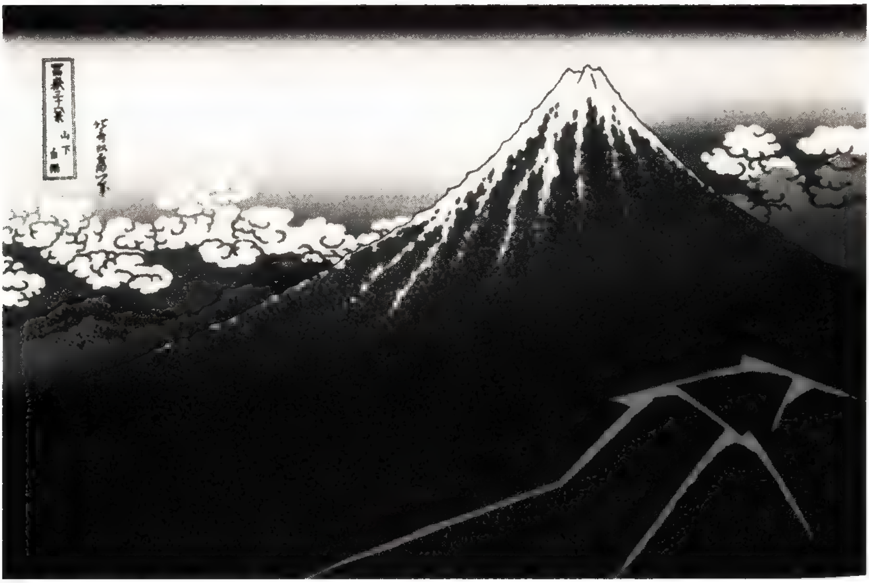
I feel him reaching for control of my arm as I exhale. But it is too late. It is already moving. I feel the blade enter my throat, well placed.

"Fool!" he cries. "You do not know what you have done! I cannot return!"

"I know."

As I slump against the terminal I seem to hear a roaring sound, growing, at my back. It is the Big Wave, finally come for me. My only regret is that I did not make it to the final station, unless, of course, that is what Hokusai is trying to show me, there beside the tiny window, beyond the fog and the rain and the night.

24. MT. FUJI IN A SUMMER STORM



Katsushika Hokusai, woodblock print, c. 1823–1830

A Word from Zelazny

"I recall mentioning in a letter to my friend Carl Yoke something concerning the appearance of the mountains behind my home and my having realized but recently that seeing them in a different aspect every season, every day—every time I look at them, actually—had a lot to do with the [preceding] story; and that my coming across the book of Hokusai's prints which gets mentioned in the text of this tale was only the proximate cause of its composition. Without my mountains there would have been no meditations, no story, no Hugo (this one accepted by Shawna McCarthy, brought back to New Mexico and delivered by Parris—thanks, Shawna; thanks, Parris). I can't cite all of the lesser, contributory *kami* here. Everything goes back to the mountains."[1]

The character Mari came about partly in response to criticisms Zelazny had received about his earlier stories. "An interviewer had said to me some time before that he'd never seen anything of mine beyond short story length where the protagonist was female. He was right. I'd fallen into the habit of using men, possibly because it seemed easier for me to think like one. So I resolved to have a lady as first person narrator in my next long tale. Then I was asked why I seldom had overt sex scenes in my stories. I replied that I started out writing when magazines possessed taboos against them, & I'd simply gotten into the habit of letting such things happen offstage… Then I was asked why I so seldom killed off my characters. This is probably because I get to know them so well that I can't kill them lightly. But I promised myself I'd do it the next time around—again, to show that I could. And the next story idea that came by was the one inspired by the Hokusai prints, and I kept all three promises in it."[2]

The volume of Hokusai's prints Zelazny cites is *Hokusai's Views of Mt. Fuji*, Charles Tuttle, 1965 (with poetry by Easley Stephen Jones). The section breaks in the story are the descriptive titles created by that publisher for each painting, exactly in the sequence that they occur in the Hokusai volume. The character Mari refers to details in the paintings and not in her immediate surroundings, and she carries a copy of the same book on her journey.

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

[2] *Roger Zelazny*, Jane Linskold, Twayne 1993.

Notes

This story showcases Zelazny's experience with the martial arts and his fascination with the cultures from which they arose.

Hokusai was a Japanese painter (1760—1849) best known for more than a hundred woodblock paintings of Mt. Fuji from various perspectives. **Yin yang** is the Chinese concept of two opposing but complementary principles found in all non-static objects and processes in the universe. ***Henro*** means pilgrim. The **Chinese Year of the Tiger** last occurred in 1998 and places the story's setting from an internal reference to the 1980s being in the past by "**fourteen years—almost fifteen**." **Shere Khan** is the fierce and arrogant tiger from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. In the Japanese martial art kendo, ***suki*** is a momentary gap in defense which leaves one vulnerable to attack. An **epigon** is an inferior imitator of someone more distinguished, such as a writer or artist. ***Mo chih ch'u*** is a samurai term meaning to go straight into action without thought or hesitation. **Tōkaidō** is an ancient route from the capital region to the eastern provinces along the south shore of Japan. **Matsuo Bashō** was a prominent Japanese poet and haiku master of the Edo period. He wandered the country, writing essays and haiku reflecting on the beauty of the land, such as a contrast between the lagoons of **Matsushima** and **Kisagata.**

Geoffrey **Chaucer** was the author of *The Canterbury Tales*, in which thirty pilgrims from all classes in medieval England travel to **Canterbury**. They tell stories to kill time on their journey. Rainer Maria **Rilke** was a poet alluded to in other stories by Zelazny. Rilke did say, "There are no classes in life for beginners; right away you are always asked to deal with what is most difficult." The quote Mari is trying to recall may be from poet Joseph Brodsky, who wrote "Life is a game with many rules but no referee. One learns how to play it more by watching it than by consulting any book, including the holy book. Small wonder, then, that so many play dirty, that so few win, that so many lose."

Kokuzo is a Buddhist deity of wisdom and memory, protector of craftspeople and artisans, and guardian of those born in the Years of the Tiger and the Ox. **Even a renewal of the demyelination** refers to Mari's medical condition, multiple sclerosis (MS). **Taoist** philosophy advocates a life of complete simplicity and noninterference with the course of natural events. **Charon** is the ferryman across the river Styx or Acheron in Hades. ***Narrenschiff*** is a German tale of a doomed boat of fools; the ***Flying Dutchman*** is a ghost ship that can never go home, doomed to sail the seven seas forever. ***La navicella del mio ingegno*** is the little bark (boat) of my wit, upon which Dante hoisted sail for Purgatory in his

Divine Comedy. ***Yu Li Ch'ao*** (*The Divine Panorama*) is an epic tale of travels through hell and rebirth, thematically similar to the *Divine Comedy.* **Ginza** is a shopping and entertainment district of Tokyo. **Fuji-san** means "Fuji Mountain." **San** alone is a courtesy title (Sir, Mister, Ms.) when added as a suffix to the surname of a person being addressed. Zelanzy's use of Mt. Fuji as a character in this story, and his habit of playing with words, suggests that he intended both meanings of san. The quote from **Hart Crane** is from his "To Brooklyn Bridge"—the poet and his poem also figured in Zelazny's "Threshold of the Prophet."

Friedrich **Nietzsche** wrote that current humanity was simply the bridge to a superhuman ideal. ***Pons asinorum*** ("Bridge of Asses") is the first stage of a complex problem that tests a person's ability (classically, the fifth proposition in Euclid's *Elements*). **Bifröst** is a bridge in Norse mythology which leads from the realm of mortals, Midgard, to the realm of the gods, **Asgard**. ***Ukiyo-e*** means "pictures of the floating world" and refers to the woodblock prints made by Hokusai and others between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Joseph **Fourier** was the mathematician whose equations describe periodic or sinusoidal waves. **Kwannon** is the female bodhisattva of compassion and mercy in Eastern Buddhism. The protagonist notes that Kwannon has ambiguous gender and is known as **Kwan Yin** in China, the male **Avalokitesvara** in India, and **Chen-re-zi** in Tibet.

Arabian Nights or *One Thousand and One Nights,* a frame story, is narrated by the king's new bride. She tells her husband a new tale every night (without finishing it) so that he will not have her executed. "Aladdin" is one of these tales. **Ernest Hemingway** wrote to his friend **Bernard Berenson** about his acclaimed novel *The Old Man and the Sea,* "All the symbolism that people say is shit."

Physicist and inventor Nikola **Tesla** expected his research into ball lightning to lead to a death ray weapon. **Thomas Mann** wrote highly symbolic works that explored the psychology of the artist and intellectual. **Eugen Herrigel** was a German philosopher who introduced Zen to Europe; his most famous work was *Zen in the Art of Archery.* ***Kyudo*** is Japanese archery. **Shingon** is a major school of Japanese Buddhism whose name means "true words" or "mantra." ***Goma*** is a traditional Japanese-Buddhist fire ceremony. **Message is the medium** reverses Marshall McLuhan's philosophy of communication, "the medium is the message"—it was actually misspelled on the first edition cover as "the medium is the massage" but, ironically, few noticed. ***Memento mori*** reminds you that you will die. Hermann **Rorschach** developed the famous ink blots which he thought would reveal personality by having patients interpret them. ***Shintai*** is a manifestation of the deity, its symbol, or an object of worship in which it resides. Shakespeare's complex, introspective **Hamlet** inspired multiple interpretations of his motivations and psyche. The ***hara*** is the vital center of the self. A ***torii*** is a traditional Japanese gate commonly found at the entry to a Shinto shrine;

it has two upright supports, two crossbars on the top, and is often painted vermilion. **Emperor Sutoku** was the seventy-fifth Emperor of Japan and ruled in the twelfth century. **R'lyeh** is a fictional sunken city in the works of H. P. Lovecraft.

A **cryptameria** is a Japanese evergreen. ***Ki*** is the life force that every living being possesses. The great ash tree **Yggdrasil** holds together heaven, earth and hell in Norse mythology; the **Golden Bough** is the golden-leaved tree branch that enables the Trojan hero Aeneas to travel the underworld safely; near the winter solstice, spirits gather around the **Yule tree**; Eve picked an apple from the **Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**; Buddha Gautama's body sat beneath the **Bo tree** while his soul wandered for seven years, seeking enlightenment.

Like **R'lyeh**, **Ys** is another mythical sunken city but in Brittany. Selma Lagerloff's ***Nils Holgersson*** also features a fictional sunken city at the bottom of the sea. **The world of Lewis Carroll beneath its looking-glass surface** refers to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There.* **Ama** are girls trained to dive into shallow water and reef areas to retrieve shellfish and other marine life for gourmet meals. ***The Anatomy of Melancholy*** is an immense book by Robert Burton, published in 1621, which discusses what was then known about clinical depression. The story of **Polycrates Samius** is a quote from that text about "Melancholy in Disposition."

Geishas are traditional, female Japanese entertainers whose skills include performing Japanese music, singing, and dancing. ***Snow Country*** is a novel by Yasunari Kawabata which told of the doomed love between a Tokyo dilettante (**Shimamura**) and a provincial geisha / prostitute (**Komako**). "**Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**" is a poem by Wallace Stevens. "**The Twa Corbies**" is a traditional poem; a traveler encounters two crows discussing the dead knight they intend to eat. **Ted Hughes** was a British poet who wrote many tales about the trickster **Crow**.

Aikido is a defensive martial art (Zelazny attained a black belt and taught it) which uses the attacker's force against them. **Saké** is a Japanese liquor made from fermented rice. ***Kata*** are choreographed martial arts movements some using a staff or ***bo***. ***Hagakure*** or *The Book of the Samurai,* written by **Yamamoto Tsunetomo** and is a warrior's practical and spiritual guide. **Samurai** were the military nobility in pre-industrial Japan. **Mahdi** is the prophesied redeemer of Islam.

Akira **Kurosawa** was a prominent Japanese film director, producer and screenwriter. Cervantes's novel ***Don Quixote*** features a minor landowner who deludes himself into thinking that he is a knight errant. **Bushido** or "Way of the Warrior" is a Japanese code of conduct, similar to the concept of chivalry. A ***katana*** is a Japanese longsword or backsword traditionally used by samurai. **Don John** of Austria led the Holy League in defeating the Ottoman Empire at the Battle of

Lepanto in 1571. **José Ortega y Gasset** was a Spanish philosopher whose works included *Meditations on Quixote*. **Fyodor Dostoevsky** wrote *The Idiot* which features the epileptic, bumbling, and periodically insane **Prince Myshkin**. A **Buddha** is any being who has become fully enlightened and has experienced **Nirvana**, a state of pure consciousness. In cryptography, **Lucifer** was an early cipher, a direct precursor to the modern Data Encryption Standard that was used in banking transactions until it was broken in the 1990s.

EEG stands for electroencephalogram, a method of measuring brain waves. **Marley was dead: to begin with** is the opening sentence of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Like Mari's husband in this story, Jacob Marley features prominently in Dickens's story as a ghost. **CRT** stands for cathode-ray tube, the bulky computer monitors that are less often seen today in the era of flat screens.

Kundalini is a Hindu term for corporeal energy. Author Patrick **Lafcadio Hearn** was born on a Greek Island but traveled extensively in Japan and wrote about it, later gaining Japanese citizenship. A **bodhisattva** is dedicated to attaining Nirvana. "The **Hound of Heaven"** is a poem by Francis Thompson about a soul fleeing God.

Bōtchan is the title character of the book by **Natsume Soseki**, a tale about morals, maturity and revenge. Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) wrote ***Huckleberry Finn***; ***Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*** is a collection of humorous stories by Stephen Leacock; ***Le Grand Meaulnes*** by Alain-Fournier tells of an impulsive, reckless hero searching in vain for his lost love. **Camphorwood** and **sandalwood** are both burned as incense. **Lustrated** means purified by a propitiatory offering. A **mantra** is a sacred phrase repeated in meditation.

Sawyers cut wood (the use also recalls ***Huckleberry Finn*** and Tom Sawyer). **The Virgin and the Dynamo** is a work by Henry Adams that discusses the impact of modern advancements on existing cultures—the image refers to Venus and mythology confronted with the electric motor. ***Sushi*** is rice dressed with vinegar and topped with vegetables or fish. ***Karateka*** is a practitioner of karate. ***Tatemae*** is the facade that someone shows to others. ***Honne*** is a person's true feelings. **Miyamoto Musashi** was a famous samurai who wrote the strategy and philosophy treatises ***Book of Waters*** and *Book of Five Rings*. ***Jigai*** was a traditional method of ritual suicide for Japanese women.

Woodcuts

The section titles in Zelazny's story are descriptive names for the 24 Hokusai prints as shown in *Hokusai's Views of Mt. Fuji.*[3] Listed below are phonetic spellings of the original Japanese names for the prints together with English translations rendered by curators of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.[4]

1. *Bishū Fujimigahara* [Fuji-View Fields in Owari Province]
2. *Tōkaidō Yoshida* [Yoshida on the Tōkaidō Road]
3. *Tōkaidō Hodogaya* [Hodogaya on the Tōkaidō Road]
4. *Bushū Tamagawa* [The Tama River in Musashi Province, Edo]
5. *Fukagawa Mannen-bashi no shita* [Under the Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa, Edo]
6. *Kōshū Kajikazawa* [Kajikazawa in Kai Province]
7. *Gaifū kaisei* [Mount Fuji at Dawn]
8. *Tōkaidō Ejiri Tago no ura ryakuzu* [Tago Bay near Ejiri on the Tōkaidō Road, Abridged View]
9. *Noboto ura* [The Bay of Noboto in Shimosa Province]
10. *Sunshū Ejiri* [Ejiri in the Suruga Province]
11. *Kōshū Mishima toge* [Mishima Pass in Kai Province]
12. *Kōshū Misaka suimen* [Reflections in Lake Misaka, Kai Province]
13. *Koishikawa yuki no ashita* [Snowy Morning at Koishikawa]
14. *Shimo Meguro* [Lower Meguro]
15. *Buyō Tsukuda-jima* [Tsukuda Island in Musashi Province, Edo]
16. *Sōshū Uemzawa-zai* [Near Umezawa Manor in Sagami Province]
17. *Shinshū Suwako* [Lake Suwa in Shinano Province]
18. *Kanagawa-oki namiura* [Under the Wave off Kanagawa]
19. *Sōshū Shichirigahama* [Shichiri Beach in Sagami Province]
20. *Koshū Inumetoge* [Inume Pass in Kai Province]
21. *Tōtomi sanchu* [In the Tōtomi Mountains]
22. *Ommayagashi yori Ryōgokubashi no sekiyo* [Viewing Sunset over the Ryōgoku Bridge from the Ommaya Embankment]
23. *Tōto Asakusa Honganji* [Honganji Temple at Asakusa in Edo]
24. *Sanka hakuu* [Thunderstorm Beneath the Summit]

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[3] *Hokusai's Views of Mt. Fuji,* Charles E. Tuttle Co. 1965.

[4] *Hokusai and Hiroshige: Great Japanese Prints from the James A. Michener Collection, Honolulu Academy of Arts,* Asian Art Museum of San Francisco 1998.

ARTICLES

CONSTRUCTING A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

The Writer, October 1984.

The late James Blish was once asked where he got his ideas for science fiction stories. He gave one of the usual general answers we all do—from observation, from reading, from the sum total of all his experiences, et cetera. Then someone asked him what he did if no ideas were forthcoming from these. He immediately replied, "I plagiarize myself."

He meant, of course, that he looked over his earlier works for roads unfollowed, trusting in the persistence of concerns and the renewal of old fascinations to stimulate some new ideas. And this works. I've tried it occasionally, and I usually find my mind flooded.

But I've been writing for over twenty years, and I know something about how my mind works when I am seeking a story or telling one. I did not always know the things that I know now, and much of my earlier writing involved groping—defining themes, deciding how I really felt about people and ideas. Consequently, much of this basic thinking accomplished, it is easier for me to fit myself into the driver's seat of a fresh new story than it once was. It may be the latest model, but the steering is similar, and once I locate the gearshift I know what to do with it.

For example: Settings. For me, science fiction has always represented the rational—the extension into a future or alien environment of that which is known now—whereas fantasy represented the metaphysical—the introduction of the unknown, usually into an alien environment. The distinctions are sometimes blurred, and sometimes it is fun to blur them. But on a practical, working level, this generally is how I distinguish the two. Either sort of story (I never tire of repeating) has the same requirements as a piece of general fiction, with the added necessity of introducing that exotic environment. Of the three basic elements of any fiction—plot, character, and setting—it is the setting that requires extra attention in science fiction and fantasy. Here, as nowhere else, one walks a tightrope between overexplaining and overassuming, between boring the reader with too many details and losing the reader by not providing enough.

I found this difficult at first. I learned it by striving for economy of statement, by getting the story moving quickly and then introducing the background piecemeal. Somewhere along the line I realized that doing this properly could solve two problems: The simple exposition of the material could, if measured out in just the right doses, become an additional means of raising reader interest. I employed this technique to an extreme in the opening to my story "Unicorn Variation," in which I postponed for several pages describing the unusual creature passing through a strange locale.

> A bizarrerie of fires, cunabulum of light, it moved with a deft, almost dainty deliberation, phasing into and out of existence like a storm-shot piece of evening; or perhaps the darkness between the flares was more akin to its truest nature—swirl of black ashes assembled in prancing cadence to the lowing note of desert wind down the arroyo behind buildings as empty yet filled as the pages of unread books or stillnesses between the notes of a song.

As you see, I was careful to tell just enough to keep the reader curious. By the time it became apparent that it was a unicorn in a New Mexico ghost town, I had already introduced another character and a conflict.

Characters are less of a problem for me than settings. People are usually still people in science fiction environments. Major figures tend to occur to me almost fully developed, and minor ones do not require much work. As for their physical descriptions, it is easy at first to overdescribe. But how much does the reader really need? How much can the mind take in at one gulp? See the character entirely but mention only three things, I decided. Then quit and get on with the story. If a fourth characteristic sneaks in easily, okay. But leave it at that initially. No more. Trust that other features will occur as needed, so long as you know. "He was a tall, red-faced kid with one shoulder lower than the other." Were he a tall, red-faced kid with bright blue eyes (or large-knuckled hands or storms of freckles upon his cheeks) with one shoulder lower than the other, he would actually go out of focus a bit rather than grow clearer in the mind's eye. Too much detail creates a sensory overload, impairing the reader's ability to visualize. If such additional details are really necessary for the story line itself, it would be better to provide another dose later on, after allowing time for the first to sink in. "Yeah," he replied, blue eyes flashing.

I've mentioned settings and characters as typical examples of the development of writing reflexes, because reflexes are what this sort of work becomes with practice—and then, after a time, it should become second nature and be dismissed from thought. For this is just apprentice work—tricks—things that everybody in the trade has to learn. It is not, I feel, what writing is all about.

The important thing for me is the development and refinement of one's perception of the world, the experimentation with viewpoints. This lies at the heart of storytelling, and all of the mechanical techniques one learns are merely tools. It is the writer's approach to material that makes a story unique.

For example, I have lived in the Southwest for nearly a decade now. At some point I became interested in Indians. I began attending festivals and dances, reading anthropology, attending lectures, visiting museums. I became acquainted with Indians. At first, my interest was governed only by the desire to know more than I did. Later, though, I began to feel that a story was taking shape at some lower level of my consciousness. I waited. I continued to acquire information and experience in the area.

One day my focus narrowed to the Navajo. Later, I realized that if I could determine why my interest had suddenly taken this direction, I would have a story. This came about when I discovered the fact that the Navajo had developed their own words—several hundred of them—for naming the various parts of the internal combustion engine. It was not the same with other Indian tribes I knew of. When introduced to cars, other tribes had simply taken to using the Anglo words for carburetors, pistons, spark plugs, etc. But the Navajo had actually come up with new Navajo words for these items—a sign, as I saw it, of their independence and their adaptability.

I looked further. The Hopis and the Pueblo Indians, neighbors to the Navajo, had rain dances in their rituals. The Navajo made no great effort to control the weather in this fashion. Instead, they adapted to rain or drought.

Adaptability. That was it. It became the theme of my novel. Suppose, I asked myself, I were to take a contemporary Navajo and by means of the time-dilation effects of space travel coupled with life extension treatments, I saw to it that he was still alive and in fairly good shape, say, one hundred seventy years from now? There would, of necessity, be gaps in his history during the time he was away, a period in which a lot of changes would have occurred here on Earth. That was how the idea for *Eye of Cat* came to me.

But an idea is not a science fiction novel. How do you turn it into one?

I asked myself why he would have been away so frequently. Suppose he'd been a really fine tracker and hunter? I wondered. Then he could have been a logical choice as a collector of alien-life specimens. That rang true, so I took it from there. A problem involving a nasty alien being could serve as a reason for bringing my Navajo character out of retirement and provide the basis for a conflict.

I also wanted something representing his past and the Navajo traditions, something more than just his wilderness abilities—some things he had turned his back on. Navajo legend provided me with the *chindi*, an evil spirit I could set to bedeviling him. It occurred to me then that this evil spirit could be made to correspond with some unusual creature he himself had brought to Earth a long time ago.

That was the rough idea. Though not a complete plot summary, this will show how the story took form, beginning with a simple observation and leading to the creation of a character and a situation. This small segment of the story would come under the heading of "inspiration"; most of the rest involved the application of reasoning to what the imagination had so far provided.

This required some tricky considerations. I firmly believe that I could write the same story—effectively—in dozens of different ways: as a comedy, as a tragedy, as something in between; from a minor character's point of view, in the first person, in the third, in a different tense, et cetera. But I also believe that for a particular piece of fiction, there is one way to proceed that is better than any of the others. I feel that the material should dictate the form. Making it do this properly is for me the most difficult and rewarding part of the storytelling act. It goes beyond all of the reflex tricks, into the area of aesthetics.

So I had to determine what approach would best produce the tone that I wished to achieve. This, of course, required clarifying my own feelings.

My protagonist, Billy Blackhorse Singer, though born into a near-neolithic environment, later received an advanced formal education. That alone was enough to create some conflicts within him. One may reject one's past or try to accommodate to it. Bill rejected quite a bit. He was a very capable man, but he was overwhelmed. I decided to give him an opportunity to come to terms with everything in his life.

I saw that this was going to be a novel of character. Showing a character as complex as Billy's would require some doing. His early life was involved with the myths, legends, shamanism of his people, and since this background was still a strong element in his character, I tried to show this by interspersing in the narrative my paraphrases of different sections of the Navajo creation myth and other appropriate legendary material. I decided to do some of this as poetry, some original, some only loosely based on traditional materials. This, I hoped, would give the book some flavor as well as help to shape my character.

The problem of injecting the futuristic background material was heightened, because I was already burdening the narrative with the intermittent doses of Indian material. I needed to find a way to encapsulate and abbreviate, so I stole a trick from Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy. I introduced "Disk" sections, analogous to his "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye" sequences—a few pages here and there made up of headlines, news reports, snatches of popular songs, to give the flavor of the times. This device served to get in a lot of background without slowing the pace, and its odd format was almost certain to be sufficiently interesting visually to arouse the reader's curiosity.

The evolving plot required the introduction of a half dozen secondary characters—and not just minor ones whom I might bring in as completely stock figures. Pausing to do full-scale portraits of each—by means of long flashbacks, say—could be fatal to the narrative, however, as they were scheduled to appear just as the story was picking up the pace. So I took a chance and broke a major writing rule.

Almost every book you read about writing will say, "Show. Don't tell." That is, you do not simply tell the reader what a character is like; you demonstrate it, because telling will generally produce a distancing effect and arouse a ho-hum response in the reader. There is little reader identification, little empathy created in merely telling about people.

I decided that not only was I going to tell the reader what each character was like, I was going to try to make it an interesting reading experience. In fact, I had to.

If you are going to break a rule, capitalize on it. Do it big. Exploit it. Turn it into a virtue.

I captioned a section with each character's name, followed the name with a comma and wrote one long, complex, character-describing sentence, breaking its various clauses and phrases into separate lines, so that it was strung out to give the appearance of a Whitmanesque piece of poetry. As with my "Disk" sections, I wanted to make this sufficiently interesting visually to pull the reader through what was, actually, straight exposition.

Another problem in the book arose when a number of telepaths used their unusual communicative abilities to form temporarily a composite or mass-mind. There were points at which I had to show this mind in operation. *Finnegans Wake* occurred to me as a good model for the stream of consciousness I wanted to use for this. And Anthony Burgess's *Joysprick*, which I'd recently read, had contained a section that could be taken as a primer for writing in this fashion. I followed.

Then, for purposes of achieving verisimilitude, I traveled through Canyon de Chelly with a Navajo guide. As I wrote the portions of the book set in the Canyon, I had before me, along with my memories, a map, my photographs, and archaeological descriptions of the route Billy followed. This use of realism, I hoped, would help to achieve some balance against the impressionism and radical storytelling techniques I had employed elsewhere.

These were some of the problems I faced in writing *Eye of Cat* and some of the solutions I used to deal with them. Thematically, though, many of the questions I asked myself and many of the ideas I considered were things that had been with me all along; only the technical solutions and the story's resolution were different this time. In this respect, I was, at one level, still plagiarizing my earlier self. Nothing wrong with that, if some growth has occurred in the meantime.

From everything I've said, it may sound as if the novel was wildly experimental. It wasn't. The general theme was timeless—a consideration of change and adjustment, of growth. While science fiction often deals with the future and bears exotic trappings, its real, deep considerations involve human nature, which has been the same for a long time and which, I believe, will continue much as it is for an even longer time. So in one sense we constantly seek new ways to say old things. But human nature is a generality. The individual does change, does adapt, and this applies to the writer as well as to the characters. And it is in these changes—in self-consciousness, perception, sensibility—that I feel the strongest, most valid stories have their source, whatever the devices most suitable for their telling.

A Word from Zelazny

"Sylvia Burack asked me for an essay for *The Writer*, and I did the [preceding] piece. A large chunk of it tells of the considerations which went into the composition of my novel *Eye of Cat*. I don't believe I've ever recorded the things I do and think in writing a book in such detail, before or since. Still, it's a short piece, and for those of you who care about such matters I am including it here."[1]

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[1] *Frost & Fire*, William Morrow 1989.

APPENDIX C

Eye of Cat, Timescape/Simon & Schuster 1982.
Separately: *Hymn to the Sun: An Imitation*, DNA Publications 1996.

I. Traditional

At the door to the House of Darkness
    lies a pair of red coyotes with heads reversed.
Nayenezgani parts them with his dark staff
    and comes in search of me.
With lightning behind him,
    with lightning before him,
    he comes in search of me,
with a rock crystal and a talking *kétahn*.

Beyond, at the corners by the door
    of the House of Darkness,
lie two red bluejays with heads reversed.
With lightning behind him,
    with lightning before him,
he parts them with his dark staff
    and comes in search of me.

Farther, at the fire-pit of the Dark House,
    lie two red hoot-owls with heads reversed.
He parts these with his staff
    and comes in search of me,
with rock crystal and talking *kétahn*

At the center of the Darkness House
    where two red screech-owls lie with heads reversed,
Nayenezgani casts them aside
    coming in search of me,
    lightning behind him,
    lightning before him.
Bearing a rock crystal and a talking *kétahn*,
    he comes for me.
From the center of the earth he comes.

Farther…

In the center of my house of yellow corn I stand, and
    I say this: I am Black-god who speaks to you.
I come and stand below the north. I say this:
Down from the top of Darkness Mountain which lies
    before me a crystal doe stands up and comes to me.
Hooftip to kneetip, body to face, followed by game of
    all kinds, it walks into my hand. When I call to it,
    when I pray for it, it comes to me, followed by
    game of all kinds.
I am Black-god who speaks to you. I stand below
    the north.
They come to me out of Darkness Mountain.

There is danger where I walk,
in my moccasins, leggings, shirt
of black obsidian.
My belt is a black arrowsnake.
Black snakes coil and rear about my head.
The zigzag lightning flashes from my feet,
my knees, my speaking tongue.
I wear a disk of pollen upon my head.
The snakes eat it.
There is danger where I walk.
I am become something frightful.
I am whirlwind and gray bear.
The lightning plays about me.
There is danger where I walk.

Farther yet, he returns with me, Nayenezgani,
spinning his dark staff for protection.
The lightnings flash behind him and before him.
To the ladder's first rung,
to the Emerging Place
he returns with me;
and the rainbow returns with me
and the talking *kétahn* teaches me.
We mount the ladder's twelve rungs.
Small blue birds sing above me,
Cornbeetle sings behind me.
I will climb Emergence Mountain,
Chief Mountain, Rain Mountain,
Corn Mountain, Pollen Mountain…
Returning. Upon the pollen figure to sit.
To own the home, the fire, the food,
the resting place, the feet, the legs, the body,
to hold the mind and the voice, the power
of movement. The speech, that is blessed.
Returning with me. Gathering these things,
climbing. Through the mists and clouds,
the mosses and grasses,
the woods and rocks, the earth,
of the four colors. Returning.
"Grandchild, we stand upon the rainbow."

II. Lightly derivative

The Iroquois called you
the Being without a Face.
I go to look and see if this is true,
the great Destroyer
who goes about menacing
with couched lance and raised hatchet.
I put my feet down with pollen
as I walk.
I place my hands so,
with pollen.

I move my head with pollen.
My feet, my hands, my body
are become pollen,
and my mind, even my voice.
The trail is beautiful.
Aqualàni, Dinetah.
My spirit wanders across you.
I go to see the Faceless One.
Impervious to pain may I walk:
With beauty all about me may I walk.
it closes in beauty.
I shall not return.
Be still.

The track of the wind upon my fingertips,
mark of my mortality.
The track of the rain upon my hand,
mark of the waiting world.
A song that rises unbidden within me,
mark of my spirit.
The light of that half-place
where his mount danced for Crazy Horse,
mark of that other world
where powers still walk, stones talk
and nothing is what it seems to be.
We will meet in an old place.
The earth will tremble. The stones will drink.
Things forgotten are shadows.
The shadows will be as real
as wind and rain and song and light,
there in the old place.
Spider Woman atop your rock,
I would greet you,
but I am going the other way.
Only a fool would go there at all
when the waters are running.
I am going to an old place.
He who follows must go there, too.
Windmark, raintouch, songrise, light,

with me, on me, in me, about me.
It is good to be a fool when the time is right.

I am a son of the Sun
and Changing Woman.
I go to an old place.
Na-ya!

The wind stirs the grasses.
The snow glides across the earth.
The whirlwind walks on the mountain,
raising dust.
The rocks are ringing

high on the mountain, behind the fog.
The sun's light is running out
like water from a cracked pitcher.
We shall live again.
The snowy earth
slides out of the whirling wind.
We shall live again.

III. Original

There was a time when the day light was night light.
Black-god rode upon my right shoulder.
Time spun moebius about me, as I sailed
up Darkness Mountain in the sky.
And the beasts, the beasts I hunted.
When I called them they would come to me,
out of Darkness Mountain.

Traveling the distance from hill to hill,
passing from place to place as the wind passes,
trackless. There should be a song for it,
but I have never learned the words.
So I sing this one of my own making:
I am become a rainbow, beginning there
and ending here. I leave no mark

upon the land between as I arc
from there to here.
May I go in beauty.
May it lie before, behind, above and below,
to the right and the left of me.
I pass cleanly through the gates of the sky.

Between the worlds walking.
Between the worlds walking.
Between the worlds walking.
Between the worlds walking.
There is something
before me, behind me,
to right and to left,
above and below.
What, on all sides,
is it?

Things that flee and things that pursue
have their seasons.
Each of us hunts
and each of us is hunted.
We are all of us prey,
we are all predators.
Knowing this, the careful hunter
is wary. The prey, too, learns boldness
beyond its normal reach.
And then there is luck,
and then the gods.
The hunt is always uncertain.

We skinned the wolf
and in the morning
a human hide hung there.
At night, it became again
the pelt of a wolf.

There is no certainty,
there is no law
in the hunt.

Talking-god be with me.
Black-god be with me.
Luck and boldness
be with me, too.

The Keeper of Clouds has unpenned his charges.
The Keeper of Winds has unlocked his gates.
The Keeper of Waters has opened the sky.
The Keeper of Lightnings waves his lances.
The Keeper of Satellites has observed,
"One hundred percent probability of precipitation."

I will walk in the places where the black clouds come at me.
I will walk in the places where the rain falls upon me.
I will walk in the places where the lightning flashes at me.
I will walk in the places where the dark fogs move about me.
I will walk where the rainbows drift and the thunders roll.
Amid dew and pollen will I walk.
They are upon my feet. They are upon my legs…

When I call,
they come to me
out of Darkness Mountain.
    Pipelines cross it,
    satellites pass above it,
    but I hold the land before me,
    and all things that hunt
    are hunted within it.
    I have followed the People
    across the eons,
    giving the proper hunter his prey
    in the proper time.
Those who hunt themselves,
however, fall into a special category.
Certain sophistications were unknown
in ancient times.
But you are never too old to learn,
which is what makes this business interesting
and keeps me black-winged. Na-ya!
Out of Darkness Mountain, then:
Send an ending.

High on the mountain of fire
in the lost place of the Old Ones,
fire falling to the right of me,
to the left of me,
before, behind, above, below,
I met myself's *chindi*,
chindi's self.
Shall I name me a name now,
to have eaten him?

I walk the rainbow trail.
In a time of ice and fire
in the lost place of the Old Ones
I met myself's *chindi*,
became my *chindi's* self
I have traveled through the worlds.
I am a hunter in all places.
My heart was divided into four parts
and eaten by the winds.
I have recovered them.

I sit at the center of the entire world
sending forth my song.
I am everywhere at home,
and all things have been given back to me.
I have followed the trail of my life
and met myself at its end.
There is beauty all around me.

Nayenezgani came for me
into the Darkness House,
putting aside with his staff
the twisted things, the things reversed.
The Dark Hunter remembers me,
Coyote remembers me,
the Sky People remember me,
this land remembers me,
I have remembered myself
coming up into the world.

I sit on the great sand-pattern
of Dinetah, here at its center.
Its power remembers me.

Coyote call across the darkness bar…
I have eaten myself and grown strong.
There is beauty all around me.
Before me, behind me, to the right
and to the left of me,
corn pollen and rainbow.
The white medicine lifts me in his hand.

The dancer at the heart of all things
turns like a dust-devil before me.
My lightning-bead is shattered.
I have spoken my own laws.

My only enemy, my self, reborn,
is also the dancer.
My trail, my mind, is filled with stars
in the great wheel of their turning
toward springtime. Stars.
I come like the rain with the wind
and all growing things.
The white medicine lifts me in his hand.
here at lost Lukachukai I say this:
The hunting never ends.
The way is beauty.
The medicine is strong.
The ghost train doesn't stop here
anymore. I am the hunter
in the eye of the hunted. If I call
they will come to me
out of Darkness Mountain.

A Word from Zelazny

These poems originally appeared in *Eye of Cat,* but Zelazny later extracted and published them as "Appendix C" in the collection *Hymn to the Sun: An Imitation.* He drew on and paraphrased both Navajo material and other material from Native Americans and First Nations People. "It's the same order of approach [as with writing "Ikhnaton's Hymn to the Sun"] with the Navajo prayers and songs there, some were authentic Indian materials but recast by me, some were made up out of whole cloth but employed the study I had made of Navajo beliefs for the book."[1]

"I became fascinated by this corner of the world [New Mexico]. I had grown interested in the Navajos—without any intention of using Navajo materials in fiction, I might add—but the more I learned about them, the more I felt a story coming into being. Then one day the idea for a book was there, and I wrote it. It was called *Eye of Cat,* and it occupies a special place in the house of my memory called Favorite Things I Have Done."[2]

Notes

The first 30 lines (ending with "Farther...") contain the poem "Evil Chasing Prayer" which was the prolog to *Eye of Cat.* Zelazny paraphrased a traditional shaman's prayer (*Qa-Ya'-Tyi*) that rescues a man's spiritual being after it has been stolen by witchcraft.

Nayenezgani, the Slayer of Alien Gods, is a legendary Navajo hero; he was born of a mating between the **Sun** and **The Changing Woman**; his brother was Tohbachischin. Navajo glossaries describe ***kétahn*** as an offering to the gods in the form of a reed cigarette, or as a walking stick carried both by gods and medicine men. The walking stick interpretation seems most appropriate here. A **couched** lance is lowered to a horizontal position, as for an attack. **Aqualàni** is a greeting meaning good health to you. **Dinetah** means Land of the Navajo. The **spider woman** is a legendary creature whom Nayenezgani slew with the help of his brother. **Na-ya!** means Good! ***Chindi*** is the spirit released with a person's dying breath; it can be evil, returning to avenge some offense; thus contact with a ***chindi*** is very dangerous and best avoided. **Lukachukai** Mountains are in Arizona and part of the Navajo territory.

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[1] *Critical Wave #33*, November 1993.

[2] *A Very Large Array,* ed. Melinda M. Snodgrass, University of New Mexico Press, 1987.

THE PROCESS OF COMPOSING

Science Fiction Source Book, ed. David Wingrove, Van Nostrand 1984.

With my novels, I tend to think of the characters first. The story begins to develop as I try these characters in different situations. With shorter fiction I generally get the idea first, and then develop a character to fit whatever it is that I want to do.

As to the original addresses of the characters and ideas, I do not know. I simply encounter them mentally and proceed from there to extend our acquaintanceships. I believe that preparation has something, though not everything, to do with it. I attempt to cultivate a state of preparedness by reading widely—sciences, history, biography, general literature, poetry. I am also very fond of the theatre and of travel.

For a long while I tended to agree with a statement of Malcolm Muggeridge's to the effect that a writer's mind best remembers those things which the writer is best able to write about. In recent years, though, I have come to embrace the corollary—that the more things I can experience, even vicariously, the more things I am better able to remember and to write about. At least, I like to think that this is the case.

Generally, I do not like knowing beforehand how I will end a novel. My ideal method of composition is to begin writing once I know my major character and a few of the situations in which he or she will be functioning—*i.e.*, about thirty percent of the story—if the feeling be present that the story does indeed exist somewhere in the basement of my mind. I enjoy relying upon a subconscious plotting mechanism and discovering its operation as I work. As I said, this is my ideal way of proceeding. It is also a luxury. And this is because it usually takes me half again as long to compose a novel in this fashion than it would if I had outlined the story first.

When speed is essential—which it often is—I will outline. This tightens and tidies, but I sometimes lose something as a result. There is a certain physical and aesthetic exhilaration which comes over me when I write in the first manner and suddenly reach what John Brunner once referred to as the "Aha!" point—the place where everything falls together in my mind and I see the entire story spread out before me like a map or a tapestry, where I realize why I had been inserting some of the material which had been rushing to mind, where the world of the book takes on a life of its own and I need but observe and transcribe rather than continue composing.

Outlines, though, often turn themselves into points of departure for me, revising themselves as I go along, so that the other subconscious process often does come into play of its own accord. I have no fundamental objection to this, as it generally results in a better story than that which I had initially recorded.

I visualize everything in my stories in considerable detail. If I cannot see a person or place clearly I cannot write about them too well. I tend to hear the dialogue, also, when rehearsing it in my mind. I sometimes think that this has something to do with a childhood spent listening to radio dramas.

I try to read for two hours every day and write for two hours every day, on no set schedule. Mornings have been best of late, however.

SCIENCE FICTION WRITING AT LENGTH

The Writer, November 1991.

In this bold new age of literary experiment and scientific breakthrough, how do the old rules apply? In science fiction the answer requires some knowledge of the field itself.

Science fiction is an interesting literary phenomenon not only because it has evolved rapidly through a great number of forms during the past 60 years—space opera, the "hard" sf tale, social sf, experimental sf, a fusion of all of the above—but because every one of these forms is itself alive and well today. Fashions come and go. New scientific gimmickry may come into prominence and be overworked, the social focus may shift from the middle or upper class of a hypothetical society to its underside. The introspective may for a time become more fashionable an emphasis than the external. But science fiction has grown to the point at which it can support all of these categories today, so that a writer need not indulge in archaeology to find good examples of any sort of science fiction story told in any fashion. And all of them are still fair game for series development. Writers of science fiction should be aware of the variety of forms available, and, in considering a possible series, should select the type closest to their interests and abilities.

The sequel, the trilogy, the series, or whatever represents a continuation of a story from one novel to another—all of these have become particularly prominent in science fiction in recent years. They have come into being for a variety of reasons, in a variety of forms, and represent a mixed bag of results.

First, it should be noted that this is not a new phenomenon. For an interesting, well-written story as well as a reasonably authentic picture of the British publishing scene of over a century ago, I recommend George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, a novel by a man intimately acquainted with the Victorian marketplace, where the "three-volume novel" was the publisher's mainstay. Readers who enjoy a certain group of characters are likely to come back for more of the same. And with a series, the appearance of each successive volume gives a boost to the sales of the previous novels. So there is a definite commercial incentive for their production.

But not all series were originally intended as series. Often, an author will write a novel that sells well beyond expectation and leaves a sufficient number of characters alive at its conclusion for an editor to see future possibilities and suggest, "Couldn't you do something more with these people/that idea/this place?"

But my longest series—novels dealing with Amber and its royal family—came about in a somewhat different manner from this. When I began to write the first novel in that series, *Nine Princes in Amber*, I had no idea where it was headed. There was actually a point at which I thought it would be a single book. I forget where I was in its telling when I realized that I had more story than I'd at first thought, and that a sequel would probably be required for its completion. So a series was born. When the second volume failed to resolve things, I decided simply to keep going till I came to the end. And it took five volumes to do it.

With my Dilvish series, on the other hand, I intentionally created a situation from which I could generate fresh stories whenever the need arose. I did this so I would never be caught short of material if I needed to produce a story in a hurry.

The stories of my nameless detective, collected in *My Name Is Legion*, came about in a similar fashion.

My novel *Madwand* was written at editorial request because its predecessor, *Changeling*, had been well received.

These are all valid means, all valid ways of going about the business. Valid, because they worked.

I have been told that the difference between a series and a serial lies in the serial's being a single, continued story, carried out through a number of volumes—as I did with Amber—whereas a series is tied together by continuing characters or a common setting, but generally it possesses brand-new plots for each successive story. This is often the case in the mystery field. It is certainly a consideration in plotting. Are you setting out to write, say, a trilogy, requiring you to conceive and execute a big, three-part story with appropriate build-up and climax for each part? Or are you attempting to create characters sufficiently interesting that there may be an indefinite demand for their adventures?

Both require that build-up and a climax in each volume—the rhythm of the novel—but the serial needs an overall crescendo as well. The most common distinction between serial and series, however, lies in characterization. Characters are supposed to develop, or at least change, in a story. If they're pretty much the same coming out as going in, the entire action seems, in a sense, wasted. In a series, though, you don't want the characters to change too much unless you're willing to risk losing those readers who liked them just as they were in the first place and only want more of the same. In its worst form, such a story represents comic-book-type heroes who revert to precisely the same situation and attitude after each adventure. There are tricks, though, for providing excitement and maintaining interest in the series without creating such a blatant flatness of character. Sherlock Holmes, for example, remained pretty much the same throughout his adventures, but a) he was seen through the eyes of another (Dr. Watson), one who was constantly amazed by his intellectual prowess and who talked about it at length; b) the magician's trick of misdirection drew part of the reader's attention from the protagonist to the puzzle that he faced; and c) there was a process of "slow revelation," allowing the reader a few new tidbits about the protagonist every now and then. These are all useful tricks to keep in mind so a continuing character won't seem too flat through a long series of tales.

Whenever we're talking of fiction at length, another practical consideration involves the amount of material to be used. If we're thinking in terms of a quarter-million-word story, rather than one of 85,000 words, how are we to maintain the pace and hold reader interest while achieving the length, without "padding"? The answer is in the second step of plotting.

After the writer has worked out what is to happen in a story, he must consider how it is to be told. Using the point of view of a single character is rewarding in that it provides constant opportunity for characterization in depth; on the other hand, it is often inappropriate when dealing with a "broad canvas" story. A writer might consider using third-person viewpoint, with subplots featuring a number of point-of-view characters, maintaining suspense by separating these characters and then following and departing from them at crucial moments—in effect, telling several stories, a piece at a time, all of them fitting together into the greater whole. William Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is an excellent example of this technique, as it is when used by writers as diverse as J. R. R. Tolkien and Edgar Rice Burroughs. This presupposes a single, long story spaced out over a number of books.

Another method, found in the mystery field, is to use the same character in a sequence of totally different stories, as I did with my futuristic detective in *My Name Is Legion.* I could still bring him back—same character, same world, same methods of operation—in a new story which could stand independent of the earlier ones. Unlike Dilvish, there was not a continuing thread, a kind of "overstory" lurking in the background—one which finally got told in a novel (*i.e., The Changing Land*). In such a case, it is easier to find some new wine with which to fill such a bottle than to nurture a fresh grape crop. Knowing when to quit may well be the hardest part of such an enterprise.

Once an entertainment ceases to be fun, you should stop. I've seen too many good stories dragged out beyond the point of no return, just for the sales. Don't do it. There are plenty more stories waiting to be written in the place where that first, good impulse arose. If that creative impulse isn't there, don't be persuaded to force it. Go write something new and different.

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION: A WRITER'S VIEW

Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction, eds. George E. Slusser & Eric S. Rabkin, Southern Illinois University Press 1987.

I have often wondered whether I am a science fiction writer dreaming I am a fantasy writer, or the other way around. Most of my science fiction contains some element of fantasy, and vice versa. I suppose that this could be annoying to purists of both persuasions, who may feel that I am spoiling an otherwise acceptable science fiction story with the inclusion of the unexplained, or that I am violating the purity of a fantasy by causing its wonders to conform to too rational a set of strictures.

There may be some truth in this, so the least I can do is try to tell you why I operate this way, what this seeming hybrid nature of much of my work means to me and how I see this meaning as applying to the area at large.

My first independent reading as a schoolboy involved mythology—in large quantities. It was not until later that I discovered folk tales, fairy tales, fantastic voyages. And it was not until considerably later—at age eleven—that I read my first science fiction story.

It actually did not occur to me until recently that this course of reading pretty much paralleled the development of the area. First came fantasy, with its roots in early religious systems—mythology—and epical literature. Watered-down versions of these materials survived the rise of Christianity in the form of legends, folklore, fairy tales, and some incorporated the Christian elements as well. Later came the fantastic voyages, the utopias. Then, finally, with the industrial revolution, scientific justifications were substituted for the supernatural by Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells. I had actually read things in the proper chronological order.

I feel now that this colored my entire approach to the use of the fabulous in literature. The earliest writings of the fantasy sort involved considerable speculation from a small and shaky factual base. A lot of guesswork and supernatural justifications for events came into play. I accepted these things as a child would—uncritically—my only reading criterion being whether I enjoyed a story. About the time I discovered science fiction I was somewhere near the threshold of reflection. I began to appreciate the value of reason. I even began to enjoy reading about science. In a way, I guess, I was a case of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny.

I have never gotten away from a fondness for all of these forms—I suppose because my thinking has been touched by all of them. Emotionally, I find it difficult to draw distinctions between science fiction and fantasy because I feel them to be different areas of a continuum—the same ingredients but different proportions. Intellectually, however, I understand that if the fabulous elements involve the supernatural, or are simply unexplained in terms of an intelligent person's understanding of how natural laws operate, then that particular story should be considered a fantasy.

If the fabulous should be explained, or indicated to be explainable in terms of the present state of human knowledge or theory—or some extension thereof—I can see how a story of this sort can be considered to be science fiction.

When I write, though, I generally do not think in terms of such facile compartmentalizations. I feel that fiction should mirror life and that its *modus* is that classical act of *mimesis*, the imitation of an action. I concede that it is a distorting mirror we use in science fiction and fantasy; nevertheless, it should represent in some fashion everything which is placed before it. The peculiar virtue of a distorting mirror is its ability to lay special emphasis upon those features of consensus reality which the writer wishes to accent—a thing which in many ways places what we do close to satire, in the classical sense—making the science fiction and fantasy worlds special ways of talking about the present world. Another is the particularly wide range of characters this practice permits me to explore.

Not only do I not like to think of my stories in terms of separate science fiction and fantasy categories, but I feel that for me it would actually be harmful in terms of the creative act to drive such a wedge into my view of the continuum. According to John Pfeiffer, author of *The Human Brain*, "There is an entire universe packed inside your skull, a compact model of your surroundings based on all the experiences you have accumulated during the course of a lifetime." Of necessity such a model is limited by the range of one's perceptions and the nature of one's experiences.

Thus, the world about which I write, the world to which I hold up my distorting mirror, is not the real world in any ultimate sense. It is only my limited, personal image of the real world. Therefore, though I have tried hard to make my version of reality as complete a model as possible, there are gaps, dark areas which exist in testimony to my ignorance of various matters. We all possess these dark areas, somewhere, because we have not world enough nor time to take in everything. These are a part of the human condition—Jung's shadows, if you like; unfilled addresses in our personal databases, if you prefer.

What has this to do with the fabulous—with fantasy and science fiction? My feelings are that science fiction, with its rational, quasi-documentable approach to existence, springs from the well-lighted, well-regulated areas of our private universes, whereas fantasy, in the tradition of its historical origins, has its roots in the dark areas. Somewhere, I already hear voices raised in objection to my implication that fantasy springs from ignorance and science fiction from enlightenment. In a way it is true, and in a way it is not. To quote Edith Hamilton, "There has probably not been a better educated generation than the one that ushered in the end of Athens." Yet it was these same highly rational Greeks who passed classical mythology along to us, in its most powerful, sophisticated forms, while providing material for early chapters in world history books.

Fantasy may take its premises from the unknown, but what it does with them immediately thereafter is subject them to the same rational processes used by any storyteller in the working out of a tale. The story itself then unfolds in a perfectly clear-cut fashion.

I am not saying that the dark areas represent things which are ultimately unknowable, but only that these are representations of the unknown within the minds of individual authors—from the nameless horrors of Lovecraft to the mental processes of Larry Niven's Puppeteers. I doubt that any two authors' world models coincide exactly. And I feel that the generalization and representation of these clouds of unknowing in literature are a basis for fantasy.

I wish to take things one step further, however. I can hardly deny the effectiveness of a good story which is purely fantasy nor of another which is purely science fiction, in terms of the distinctions as I see them.

As I said earlier, I tend not to think of such distinctions at all while I am working. When I am writing a story of some length, my personal sense of aesthetics usually causes me to strive for closure, to go for the full picture, to give at least a nod to everything I regard in that version of reality. As a consequence, my stories reflect the dark areas as well as the light ones; they contain a few ambiguous or unexplained matters along with a majority of things which follow the rules. In other words, I tend to mix my fantasy and my science fiction. Looked at one way, what I write is, I suppose, science fantasy—a bastard genre, according to some thinking on the matter. I am not sure what that makes me.

I followed this pattern in my first book—*This Immortal*—by leaving certain things unexplained and open to multiple interpretations. I did it again in my second book—*The Dream Master*—only there the dark areas were in the human psyche itself rather than in events. It was present in the Pe'ian religion and its effects on my narrator, Francis Sandow, in the otherwise science fiction novel *Isle of the Dead*. In *Lord of Light*, I wrote a book where events could be taken either as science fiction or as fantasy with but a slight shifting of accent. And so on, up through my recent novel, *Eye of Cat*, where the final quarter of the book may be taken either as fantasy or as hallucination, according to one's taste in such matters. I write that way because I must, because a small part of me that wishes to remain honest while telling the calculated lies of fiction feels obliged to indicate in this manner that I do not know everything, and that my ignorance, too, must somehow be manifested in the universes which I create.

I was wondering recently where this placed me within the general context of American incarnations of the fabulous. I began reviewing their history with this in mind, and I was struck by a serendipitous insight into our relationship to the grand scheme of things.

We did it backwards.

American fantastic literature began the pulp magazines of the late 1920s. From that time on through the 1930s it was heavily indebted to other sorts of adventure tales. We can regard this as a kind of *Ur*-science fiction, whence rose the impetus which has carried all of the rest.

What happened, then, in the 1940s? This was the time of the "hard" science fiction story, the time of the sort of story referred to by Kingsley Amis as having the "idea as hero." Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein in particular exemplify this period when the idea, derived from science, dominated the narrative. At initial regard, it should not seem strange that our science fiction entered its first recognizable period with what was the latest phase in the historical development of fantastic literature—that technologically oriented form of the fabulous narrative which had to await the appropriate development of the sciences. But what happened next?

In the 1950s, with the collapse of many of the science fiction magazines and the migration of science fiction to the paperback and hardcover book markets, along with the freedom from magazine restrictions thus obtained, came a shifting of concerns to the sociological and political areas. The idea was still hero, but the ideas were no longer derived exclusively from the physical sciences. I think of Edward Bellamy and of Fred Pohl. I think of Thomas More and of Mack Reynolds. I think of Nietzsche and of some of Freud's character studies (which I can only classify as fantasies) and I think of Philip José Farmer. Looking back even further to the pastoral genre I also think of Ray Bradbury and of Clifford Simak.

Moving—ahead, I suppose—to the experimental work of the 1960s, I recall the *Carmina Burana*, the troubadours, the minnesingers, the lyrical literature of self of an even earlier period.

And the 1970s? We saw a resurgence of fantasy—fat-volumed trilogies detailing marvelous exploits of gods, warriors, and wizards—a thing which is with us still, and which in recent years, as with Tolkien, has taken on the overtones of ersatz scripture.

American fabulous literature appears to have recapitulated phylogeny in reverse. We worked at it steadily and have finally made it back to the mythic beginning—which is where I came in. I have a strange sense of *déjà vu*, of my lost past recaptured, on reading much of the current material in the area.

Such are the joys, you might say, of being able to select my own examples. True. I can point to numerous exceptions to every generalization I've made. Yet I feel there is something to what I have said or I would not have sketched this tendency in even this wavery impressionistic outline.

So where do we go from here? I see three possibilities and a whimsical vision: We can drop back into the *Ur* and write adventure stories with just the fabulous trappings—which is the direction Hollywood seems to have taken. Or we can turn around now and work our way forward again, catching up with H. G. Wells sometime around the turn of the century. Or we can fall back upon our experience and strive for a synthesis—a form of science fiction which combines good storytelling with the technological sensitivity of the forties, the sociological concerns of the fifties, and the attention to better writing and improved characterization which came out of the sixties.

Those, I say, are three possibilities. A less likely avenue might be to do the latter and also to incorporate the experience of the ancient 1970s, when fantasy reached what may have been its greatest peak in this century. That is, to use all of the above with a dash of darkness here and there, to add to the flavor without overpowering the principal ingredients, to manipulate our fancies through a range of rationality and bafflement—in that our imagination needs both to fuel it, and a fullness of expression requires the acknowledgment of chaos and darkness opposed by the sum of our knowledge and the more successful traditions of thought to which we are heir.

I feel that it is this opposition which generates the tensions and conflicts of the human mind and heart implicit in all particularly good writing, secondary to the narrative line itself but essential if that nebulous quality known as tone is to sound with veracity in the search for mimetic verisimilitude. This quality, I feel, is present in the best writing in any genre—or in no genre at all, for labels are only a matter of convenience, and subject to revision by manufacturers or college catalog editors. One must, of course, feel strongly about such matters when attempting to recast the field in one's own image, for one would hate to dim the vision of those hard, gemlike authorial virtues of narcissism and arrogance.

Will science fiction and fantasy go this way? Partly, it depends on who is writing it—and to the extent that I see many talented newcomers in the area, I am heartened. The most gifted writers seem to be the ones who care the least what you call one of these things we are talking about, other than a story. Their main concern is how effectively a tale has been told. The area itself, like life, will go through the usual cycles of fads, periodic overemphasis of a certain sort of theme or character—as well as fat books, thin books, and trilogies. The best stories will be remembered years later. What they may be like, I can't really say. I'm not in the prediction business.

A Word from Zelazny

"[This is] just a little talk that I gave when keynoting the Seventh Annual Eaton Conference on Fantasy and Science Fiction at the University of California at Riverside, in 1985, where I was treated well."[1]

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[1] *Frost & Fire,* William Morrow 1989.

BEYOND THE IDEA

The Writer, March 1988.

Writers in general and science fiction writers in particular dislike the question, "Where do you get your ideas?" I have always felt that a far better question would be, "What do you do with your ideas after you get them?" but I have to acknowledge that I have learned some useful things from responses to the first one.

You see, I once asked someone where he got his ideas. You'd think I'd have known better, for I was already writing professionally at the time. I had heard the question dozens of times myself, and I knew that my own answers were seldom satisfactory. But, I told myself, this was a special situation. The man was neither a novelist nor a short story writer. He was a cartoonist, and I was impressed by his ability to come up with a fresh gag for every day of the week, every week of the year.

He smiled, he told me, I believed him, and I've gotten a lot of mileage out of his answer.

He informed me that he used the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory. For me, it was one of those moments when insight actually flashes. There was light. He was not kidding. He saw the Yellow Pages as a complete compendium of the goods and services available in modern society, and meditation on a few entries invariably stirred something in his mind in the way of a comment on the society that had engendered them. My own use of this routine has varied only to the extent that science fiction writers generally use the future as a means of talking about the present. Ergo, whenever I played the Yellow Pages game, I would project fifty years into the future the first half dozen or so entries to which I turned, and then I would ask myself just how that sort of business would be run a half-century from now.

I would make some guesses about what society might be like—simple, straight-line, if-this-goes-on assumptions. Then I would try the "what if?" variations; *e.g.*, what if some of the customers (or employees) aren't human—are aliens, computer intelligences, dolphins… Finally, I would try shifting the business to another world, testing it in an even stranger setting. My story, "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," actually owed something to a bait-and-tackle ad.

Sure, it's only a gimmick. It is also one of the best gimmicks I have ever come across, a technique capable of generating genuine story ideas. But so what? I come, finally, to my point: Ideas are not enough. Not for a story of any length.

* * *

Science fiction has often been called a literature of ideas. I am not denying this. I am just returning to the question, "What do you do with your ideas after you get them?" The post-idea approach has grown steadily in importance for me for a couple of decades.

It was possible for Kingsley Amis to refer to much of the science fiction of forty years ago as literature in which the idea is the hero. Novelty, shock value, and spectacle were the substance of much early writing in the sf field: a description of weightlessness in outer space might occupy several pages; long discussions of the relativistic effects of high velocity interstellar travel might be in order; the paradox involved in traveling back through time and killing one's ancestor might be detailed at great length. The characters involved in these situations could be stock figures. Who cared? The situations were intrinsically interesting.

But jokes are less funny the second or third time around. Much that was substance becomes convention, to be dealt with in a phrase or two such as, "We engaged the interstellar drive and jumped into hyperspace" or "We settled in for the generations-long cold sleep between the stars" (for those writers who don't care much for hyperspace).

Ideas from the "softer" social sciences were brought into science fiction in the fifties, and the sixties saw the focus shift to story values themselves—with greater attention to characterization and more sophisticated narrative techniques. From our present vantage point, the seventies could probably be viewed as a period of synthesis, when all of these things fused to produce a more mature literary form. At this time, the considerations involved in writing a science fiction story are the same as those for writing any other sort of story, with extra attention paid to all the things that make it science fiction.

❖ ❖ ❖

To discard any of the tools or to abandon any of the concerns we have acquired since the forties would be foolish. Science fiction is still a literature of ideas, but one generally needs more than an idea to make it work. A fresh and exceptionally clever idea *could* still carry a novel—and certainly a short story—on its own, invoking something of the imaginative power of earlier days, if that's all that one cared to do… I am thinking here of top-of-the-line ideas, such as the planetary engineering of Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, the wild biochips of Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, the cyberspace of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and the genetic engineering for an open-space culture in John McLoughlin's *Helix and the Sword*. In each of these instances, the author has gone beyond concept and written a strong story with interesting characters.

One must always remember that today's fresh and exceptionally clever ideas are already on their way to becoming tomorrow's conventions, and the real staying power of the tale will be predicated upon story values as well as the ideas. Therefore, one must think about the special problems of settings and consider the unusual opportunities the area holds for character development when deciding what to do with one's idea. I feel that the greatest difficulty, as well as one of the greatest challenges, in writing science fiction lies in settings. One cannot simply indicate New York, Paris, San Francisco with a few impressionistic strokes and get on with the action. Or, if one can, the problem will usually crop up someplace else. If it is a future setting, we must show what is different about it. If we are describing another planet, there is a lot of material to get across. If it is a parallel world or if the viewpoint character is a person whose vision runs on different wavelengths from the human norm, we have much to indicate. The problem obviously lies in detailing these things in a sufficiently interesting or at least acceptable fashion to hold the reader's attention through what amounts to protracted exposition. For me, the best way of doing it usually involves dividing this material into several segments and slipping it in among passages involving action or fairly lively dialogue. Also, it can in part be used to bait the narrative hook. To choose two examples—one science fiction and one fantasy—from my bookshelves:

> If a man walks in dressed like a hick and acting as if he owned the place, he's a spaceman.
>
> (*Double Star,* Robert A. Heinlein)

> It was in that year when the fashion in cruelty demanded not only the crucifixion of peasant children, but a similar fate for their pets, that I first met Lucifer and was transported into Hell; for the Prince of Darkness wished to strike a bargain with me.
>
> (*The War Hound and the World's Pain,*
> Michael Moorcock)

Anything that can be made to serve a double purpose in narrative, also serves a third purpose: esthetics. If you can deal with more than one narrative necessity by means of a single statement—say, background explanation plus characterization, or plot as well as setting—you are streamlining your tale in the direction of elegance. Such economy is most valuable in a short story of any sort—but in science fiction, where the burden of additional background is always present, it is a quality worth cultivating at any length.

...And then there is character. If setting is the burden of science fiction (though there is always someone like Jack Vance to turn it into a rare and peculiar virtue), then character is one of the rewards. Science fiction is the only area of modern prose in which characters of the sort Northrop Frye referred to as high mimetic mode (greater than one's fellows) and mythic mode figures (greater than others and also greater than one's environment) are still employed. In addition to the realistic or ironic characters who inhabit much of modern fiction, science fiction often has justifiable need for figures normally found in mythic literature or classical tragedy—in the persons of aliens, mutants, androids, robots, sentient computers, cyborgs or individuals who are the products of genetic engineering. The range of character, I maintain, is greater in science fiction than anywhere else in fiction today.

It is possible to let your fingers do the walking and to come up with a neat little idea. However, I have always considered ideas a relatively cheap commodity. While some editors act as if the ideas are what they care most about, the cagier ones know that it is really the writing that they are buying.

If, therefore, you wish to toughen your writing for the long haul, practice clever ways of injecting background material, and consider the infinite aspects of character and the conflicts it might take to reveal something about it. The great new ideas will one day be a footnote to someone's dissertation. The character, if you have done your job well, may be someone worth remembering.

Unfortunately, I have never found a Yellow Pages equivalent for character. For sound characterization, observation, introspection, and reading of good examples is the best preparation I can suggest. If you follow this counsel, I believe that one day you will find that your best ideas will emerge from the consideration of character rather than external influences.

Notes

Northrop Frye was a Canadian literary critic and author whose interest in mythology influenced Zelazny's thoughts about writing.

"...AND CALL ME ROGER"

THE LITERARY LIFE OF ROGER ZELAZNY, PART 5

by Christopher S. Kovacs, MD

—1982—

Aikido Black

In 1982 Zelazny began studying aikido, a defensive martial art, under Phil Cleverley. Zelazny liked aikido's philosophy: embrace the attack and turn the force back upon the attacker. Zelazny's introduction to *Warriors of Blood and Dream* acknowledges Cleverley's instruction in the techniques and philosophies of the martial arts. Zelazny attained a black belt, began teaching aikido under Cleverley's guidance, and took over the Tuesday night class when Cleverley moved to Albuquerque. Teaching aikido sharpened his skills: "Explaining something you know only at a reflex level does require a sort of intellectualization I'd never run those things through in the past. I discovered it to be almost identical to my earliest experience in teaching at writing conferences and seminars."[1]

Zelazny dedicated the 1987 novel *Sign of Chaos* to Cleverley. Unfortunately, Cleverley developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and "it eroded him for about two years"[2] until he succumbed on February 26, 1990. Zelazny continued to teach the class for several years after that.[2]

Deathmask

Changeling was light sword & sorcery. Its sequel *Madwand* was darker and prompted Zelazny to consider another. "I've done two books involving a character named Pol Detson, *Changeling* and *Madwand.* I would like to do a third book to conclude that story."[3] In *Deathmask* Pol Detson would return to the world of science and battle Henry Spier. The third book's planned title refers to an element planted in the second: "There's a scene with this cave; there's a face on the wall and there are different animals in the cave watching it. I don't say what it is or why, but it's Pol's father's deathmask, created and hidden there by Mor [the aged wizard who killed Pol's father and swapped Pol with a child from the world of science]. The mask has what is basically a recording of Det Morson's mind, so that if anyone were to wear the deathmask, Det's mind would take over that person's body. I figured Det would be the only sorcerer who could successfully oppose Henry Spier. Mor had wanted to preserve the essence of someone who was also a sorcerer to oppose the side that Spier represents, the world of science. Pol Detson would be the logical person to wear his father's deathmask. He would gain his father's strength, but he would also run the danger of being possessed by his father's spirit.

"I saw the third book as a series of journeys to attempt to destroy the figures of the seven sorcerers, and also a quest for the deathmask which would be used in a confrontation with the human sorcerer, who actually is the only other person from the tech-world. Pol would have to journey back to his original world to gain some clues as to how Spier crossed over to the world of magic and what his powers are. So, in this story, Pol is going to complete the circuit and go back to the world in which he grew up."[4]

However, Zelazny never completed the trilogy. He hadn't forgotten about it, and in 1992 he remarked, "One of these days I'll get *Deathmask* written…"[5] The first two books reappeared as one volume, *Wizard World.* He'd originally planned to dedicate *Deathmask* to his daughter Shannon; instead he dedicated *A Dark Traveling* and *Way Up High* to her.

Female Characters

Critics and fans chastised Zelazny because his main characters were always men accompanied by stereotyped females. Strong women in

"He Who Shapes"/*The Dream Master,* "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," and *Lord of Light* were notable exceptions. Kali was certainly a forceful female in *Lord of Light*, but some fans argued that she disqualified herself by choosing to become a man. Perhaps unrecognized as female, a strong protagonist exacted revenge on her Nazi torturer in the 1963 story "Monologue for Two."

Prodded by an interviewer to create a "breakthrough" strong female protagonist, Zelazny replied, "It is true that I've never had a female protagonist in an extended work, though I feel that Kali, say, was a sufficiently realized character in *Lord of Light* and Eileen Shallot in *The Dream Master.* By sufficiently realized, I mean that if either were replaced with a stock character that story would fall apart, for the narratives could only have proceeded in the ways that they did because of their being individuals, *i.e.*, so unique that no one else could have done the things that they did in the ways that they did them. But this was not simply because they were female characters with large roles—as I do not believe that one's sexuality should be confused with one's individuality—but rather because these roles called for women who were individuals. In other stories, it is true that I have used stock female characters where stock female characters were all that was necessary, but then I've used stock male characters also, for the same reason. As I said in answer to an earlier question, I do not see psychological motivation as important in all stories, and I will go with external characterization where it is sufficient. As for my sometime doing a long story with a fully realized female protagonist, I'm not working on one at present, but I probably will if the right story occurs to me."[6]

Zelazny later admitted that this interview prompted him in part to create Mari in "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai."

The Writer Revealed in His Works

"I said that I try to keep myself apart from my characters. I did not say that I succeed. There are certain tendencies...you just *can't* keep yourself out completely. Writing has a certain autobiographical character to it, no matter how hard you attempt to divorce yourself from it. I am aware that I handle certain sorts of characters better than others. I try to avoid falling into the habit of taking an easy way out and using a person who is too similar in too many books. But one is limited in extent by one's own psychological makeup."[7]

"A Rose for Ecclesiastes," "The Doors of His Face," and "He Who Shapes" Revisited

After volumes 1–4 of *The Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny* were published, this biographer discovered an unpublished 1976 interview where Zelazny detailed the interrelated origins of these classic stories. Zelazny wrote "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" in October 1961 but set it aside. In the spring of 1962 he wrote two or three stories per week and made his first sales exclusively to Cele Goldsmith, Editor of *Fantastic* and *Amazing*. "I wanted to have ten stories out [at the editors] at all times, but I fell behind…I had seven out, and I didn't have an idea for a new story, so I decided to haul out the old story I had written in '61 and send it to a different market. I wanted to see if I could send it to someone else. And that story was 'A Rose for Ecclesiastes.' So I typed it up and sent it in to [Avram Davidson at] *F&SF*."[7]

But he worried that this was a mistake. "One of the reasons I refrained from submitting 'Rose' was that I felt I had overdone it, that I'd thrown in everything but the kitchen sink, that I'd overwritten it, and that I'd made the character too introspective to be sympathetic. I wasn't really sure of that as a story, but I was prompted to submit it because I wanted another story to send in that week. So for a time I did feel rather peculiar that that particular story should be so well-received."[7]

"A Rose for Ecclesiastes" appeared in the November 1963 *F&SF*. It was so well received that he dared to write one more tribute to the scientific romances of Burroughs, Kuttner, Weinbaum, and others. "So I wrote 'The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth,' and sold it to *F&SF*, and then I said to myself, 'That's it; I won't be able to use the solar system this way anymore. But I've paid my tribute to the stories I grew up on.' "[7]

After writing "Doors" he felt guilty, and that sparked another famous story. "After I did these two, it occurred to me that I might have offended an editor I liked very much because they did get some acclaim, and 'Rose' was nominated for a Hugo that year. Cele Goldsmith was the editor; she was very nice to me, buying all my early stories and such. So I decided to make it up to her by doing something at greater length other than those novelettes, and putting a lot of thought and effort into it, I wrote 'He Who Shapes' and sent it to her. Then her tenure as editor was up, and I didn't feel any emotional obligation to the magazine after that."[7]

Distinctions:

Hugo for novelette "Unicorn Variation"
Locus Poll fantasy novel #3: *The Changing Land*
Locus Poll fantasy novel #18: *Madwand*
Locus Poll novelette #2: "Unicorn Variation"

Books Published:

Eye of Cat
Dilvish, the Damned
Coils

—————1983—————

Show, Don't Tell

Zelazny slowed his writing further to intensify his self education, echoing his auditing numerous courses during college. Absorbing such information didn't guarantee its direct manifestation in his writing. Quite the opposite, critics often complained that he did not explain how his stories' inventions or spells actually worked. But this approach was consistent with his practice to show or imply rather than tell. "Nowhere in the *Koran* does Mohammed mention camels. Everybody knew what a camel was. There are any number of writers whose approach does not really involve science all that much. On the other hand, if I do want a piece of scientific information I like to know where to get it. I set up a reading program for myself eight years ago and read some 500 books on the general sciences. I do keep up with them. But how much of that I use in my stories is a very moot point."[8]

He also developed characters through their actions and words, provoking contrary criticism. Those readers accustomed to characters delineated in detail both physically and emotionally missed Zelazny's subtlety and faulted him for inadequate invention. Others declared that he created memorable, well-rounded characters. Corwin, Kalifriki, Dilvish, Mari, Sandow, and Conrad are certainly well-rounded and distinct from each other. Many of these characters are also dynamic. Corwin changes substantially from *Nine Princes in Amber* to *The Courts of Chaos*. His father and siblings are aware of it ("You have changed," [Oberon] finally said, "or else I never really knew you."[9]) while self-deprecating Corwin is less convinced ("[I] may still only be a smart-mouthed meddler."[9]).

The Promise and Problem of Hollywood

Zelazny was disenchanted with SF movies. "I have never considered film to be a good medium for SF in the first place. Our form of tale-telling is one which leaves a part of it, an important part of it (*i.e.,* the visual part of it) to the imagination. There are 'dark' places in every great SF tale. We fill them in ourselves when we read. SF calls upon the reader to participate in what is being told."[10] In a 1967 Guest of Honor speech ("Shadows" in volume 2 of this collection) he called "shadows" those necessary elements in a science fiction story or radio play not directly stated but engaging the reader's or listener's imagination.[11] For example, in a radio adaptation of a Ray Bradbury story, having an Earth ship land on the red sands of Mars accompanied by eerie background singing conjured images in the listeners' minds. "It leaves a lot to the imagination. It's almost like the old village story teller." Conversely, "if you were looking at a picture of [a space ship] though, it might cheapen it a bit. It might destroy something of the element of this particular phase of the shadow moment." He felt that "shadows" were limited in movies: "show a man and woman kissing then have a fadeout and show them having breakfast together a bit later. The imagination works. It fills in what happened during the fadeout." Otherwise, he said, movies left little to the imagination. The adaptation of *Damnation Alley* did not change his opinion on how film inadequately stimulated the imagination. In 1989 he said that "the Hollywood approach to sf is to go for the special effects, and this is usually going to be at the cost of characterization and often at the expense of idea. This is natural because film is such a visual medium, and it's much more action-oriented, even if it is dumb action. So, you have to put up with this because it's extremely difficult for an author to get control."[12] On the other hand, he was quite enthusiastic about *Star Wars*.[13]

Zelazny acknowledged that the old movies he enjoyed influenced his fiction. In 1969 he noted, "I'm a sucker for any flick that contains a) Humphrey Bogart, b) Alec Guinness. I've liked maybe a hundred movies in my life. I'll reminisce… *The Sorceress, The Seventh Seal,* *To Die in Madrid, Casablanca, The African Queen, Pimpernel Smith, Cangaciero, Black Orpheus, Hamlet* (Olivier), and—oh hell! I can't do it. I see now that I could fill the page. (But don't leave out *Kind Hearts and Coronets.*) I am sometimes very taken by Grade B stuff—don't get me wrong. I could name tons of them, too. Recently, I have liked *The Graduate, Rosemary's Baby, A Man for All Seasons, Therese and Isabelle, Cat Ballou*..."[14] This collection's afterwords mention Zelazny's allusions to motion pictures (*Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* with "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love") or his noting them as inspiration (*To Die in Madrid* inspired *Creatures of Light and Darkness*). One critic said that some of Zelazny's best stories were merely reworked old movie plots: "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" was a Clark Gable and Jean Harlow tale of "the big-game hunter who has lost his nerve, his fortune, and his bitch of a wife;" *...And Call Me Conrad* was "Tyrone Power in a combination of *White Hunter* and *Lost World* flicks;" and "The Graveyard Heart" was "a Doris Day movie...just read in, for the character names, Doris, Rock and Tony, and you'll see what I mean."[15]

People often asked Zelazny why his work didn't make it into film or why the Amber series was repeatedly optioned but not produced. He responded, "I do have a Hollywood agent and I have had many things advance to various points under option over the years. I've even done some work for studios in the past at different stages of film development. But with respect to film deals based upon my own stories, we follow a policy of not hustling them in the industry. As soon as you do that you weaken your bargaining position. We always wait until there is interest on the part of a producer and he comes to us. Hence, I will not actively promote a film deal on any particular story."[16]

Had *Damnation Alley* done well at the box office, there might have been more interest in filming Zelazny's stories. The Amber series, at least nine other novels, and several novelettes progressed through various levels of development. Those optioned included *Lord of Light,* "The Keys to December," *Doorways in the Sand,* and *The Dream Master.* Drafts of scripts for some of these films (none written by Zelazny) reside in an archive at Syracuse University.

Damnation Alley's failure hadn't turned him against adapting his stories. "No... I took their money and I'd do it again. I would hope for a better product later on, but I'm in the business to sell what I write. The way I look at it, if they make a bad movie based on something I've written it's eventually going to be relegated to the late show and forgotten, whereas the book will still be around."[8] His remark predates the movie's 1985 release in VHS format. After years of rumors that damage to the original prints made a digital release impossible, *Damnation Alley* was released on BluRay and DVD in 2011.

Unicorn Variations

The fourth short story collection, *Unicorn Variations*, republished works from the 1960s through the 1980s, including "Unicorn Variation," "Angel, Dark Angel," and "Home Is the Hangman." Well-received, the collection garnered three awards in 1984—the Balrog, Daicon and Locus. Zelazny provided autobiographical commentary, giving readers a personal context and his intention for each story.

Amber Dreams

Daniel Levack published the comprehensive *Amber Dreams: A Roger Zelazny Bibliography* in 1983. Originally planned for Gregg Press but picked up by Underwood-Miller,[17] this extensive work endeavors to identify all appearances (English or otherwise) of Zelazny's short fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and novels through 1982. Detailed descriptions of the books enable the collector to distinguish first editions from later printings. The bibliography omitted numerous obscure works (which have been unearthed for this collection) and misclassified a few stories as poems. However, Levack's book remains an important reference for Zelazny's work through 1982, especially for its identification of foreign language editions. The pictorial bibliography accompanying this collection (*The Ides of Octember*, NESFA Press, 2010) is complete for English language printings of Zelazny's work through mid-2010.

Distinctions:

Locus Poll SF novel #15: *Eye of Cat*
Locus Poll SF novel #20: *Coils*
Locus Poll collection #5: *Dilvish, the Damned*
Balrog nomination for best poet

Book Published:

Unicorn Variations

1984

Trumps of Doom

In 1984, after originally thinking that he would not—"I thought I had finished after five books. I had used up all the material I had in the back of my mind"[18]—Zelazny returned to Amber in a sequence told from a new viewpoint, that of Corwin's son, Merlin. Requests by fans, pressure from publishers, and ideas for new stories led him to resume. "I still have more stories I want to tell about the Amber universe. I had a rest, the characters had a rest, and I thought now would be a good time to go back and continue."[3]

He explained further in a 1991 interview, when publication of the tenth book was imminent: "Well, two things. I always had at the back of my mind to do a little more about Amber. I have more ideas for stories that would involve Amber, and during the period between the last book in the first series and the first book in the second series, I'd gotten an awful lot of requests from readers that I continue the stories. So between my inclination, and something of a demand for it, that when the time felt right it might not be a bad idea to go back and tell another story, I did so. Of course, sufficient time had passed that I wanted to represent the gap with the characters and the course of events as well. Originally, it was only going to be three books so I signed a three book contract with the publisher. As I wrote, I could see that I had more story there than I thought I did, so I went back and contracted to do two more as it wound up being five."[19]

The paperback house Avon Books offered what Editor David Hartwell called "a huge advance in those days": six figures for three new Amber novels.[20] Hartwell then bought the hardcover rights for Arbor House and edited what eventually became five new Amber books.

Zelazny used a Santa Fe setting for *Trumps of Doom* and included details of the city to lend authenticity. Particulars of the Santa Fe scene that Zelazny used appear in Jane Lindskold's essay, "Zelazny's Santa Fe."[21] Fans who expected to hear more about Corwin's adventures encountered narrator Merlin's unfamiliar voice instead. Readers were startled to discover that Corwin was missing and presumed dead.

Zelazny dedicated *Trumps of Doom* to his wife, Judy; the book won the Locus Award for best novel.

"24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai"

In 1984 Zelazny completed the novella, "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai." He said, "the proximate cause of the story was a book of 24 haiku-sized prints of Mt. Fuji which I found at the St. John's College bookstore one day. As I looked through it, I realized that there was a story to be written in 24 sections with each headed by one of the prints. But going back further, seeing that book would not have stimulated the story if I hadn't been looking at the [Sangre de Cristo] mountains every day."[12] The story's afterword and notes in this collection describe its genesis in more detail. This tale incorporated rich characters and lavish background; the annotations alone have it on par with "He Who Shapes" for complexity. The story appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* to great acclaim and won the 1986 Hugo for best novella; it was also a finalist for the Nebula. His novellas' and novelettes' acclaim during the previous ten years—from "Home Is the Hangman" and "Unicorn Variation" through "24 Views" to "Permafrost"—confirms that his shorter works were better crafted or, at least, better appreciated than his novels. Zelazny maintained this intense craftsmanship in his shorter works but not in the later novels.

Trickster and String Master

Zelazny's colleagues discovered that beneath his shy exterior lurked a trickster, a purveyor of practical jokes and absurd humor. Jack Dann wrote that "there was something wonderfully childlike and impish about Roger, but he kept it well hidden. You would suddenly know that you were in the presence of a practical joker, of someone who was getting a huge kick out of life, who was dancing around on the ceiling at night, swinging on rafters, somersaulting across the lawn, someone who had fooled everyone into thinking that he was shy, quiet…Roger."[22]

Zelazny wrote a biography of author and Editor Lester del Rey for the Marcon VI program book, claiming that del Rey was the devil

Mephistopheles and the spitting image of Baphomet, a winged goat with breasts and a torch between its horns. "The disguise was insufficient. His gaze, his chin hair, and his manner of speaking gave him away… It is no wonder that he fell from grace in the courts On High. He had been assigned the job of celestial reporter, going to and fro in the Earth and up and down in it, observing. After a time, however, he became an editorial writer and dared to criticize the publisher. Losing this job, he set up his own shop and has been in business ever since."[23] Zelazny ended the essay: "Here is another coal to warm his honored seat, far from the cold and vasty halls of the Establishment. Long may he wave.

"See you in Hell."[23]

Gerald Hausman observed, "One element of the trickster, I think, is doing surprising things in a spontaneous way; not things planned but things that just jump out, unrehearsed and unbidden. Once at dinner, when I was asking Roger about the power of *qi*, he swiftly took me by the wrist and brought me to the floor. It was an extremely odd thing to do at a dinner party but he was unconcerned about that. I have been doing *qi gong* for fifteen years, but I think my first lesson was that night when Roger showed me that even a man suffering from cancer and chemo could summon the inner power of a master martial artist. I still smile, thinking of it. And I think of him every morning when I'm doing my *qi gong* forms."[24]

Zelazny became adept at creating cat's cradles and other complex forms out of string, and his friends often asked him to perform. Jack Dann said, "Roger and I would bump into each other at conventions and sneak away for a drink, and I would insist that he pull out the string (which I knew he had hidden somewhere on his person) and make cat's cradles. Put a piece of string in Roger's hands, and he became a magician. He would sit there grinning at you like a Zen master while his hands would turn a circle of string into absolutely impossible shapes and forms."[22] Joe Haldeman recalled that during a visit to Russia, "he amused everybody with his string games, the extra-complicated cat's cradle things he collected from various cultures and made up himself."[25]

Zelazny's enthusiasm was infectious. Gerald Hausman said, "Whenever we went out to eat together, Roger always asked the waitress to bring the dessert menu first. This was because, as he said, 'I want to know how much room to save for dessert.' I loved this about him: that he imagined the last first."[24]

Theologians and Heretics

In his personal statement for 1984's *The Faces of Science Fiction* (which featured photographs of many top sf writers), Zelazny wrote, "Science fiction is a special way of regarding the world. Science fiction writers treat with people, things and events in terms of possible consequences. In the Middle Ages we might have been theologians, and we probably would have been burned as heretics. This is because, after a time, it is hard not to look at everything this way—at the thing itself and at the long (or short) shadow it casts before it across a twisted landscape. A slightly stark image, I note, and things sometimes do fall out that way. But the practice is fun, and getting paid for it makes it a profession. I profess science fiction, and I'm probably a lot happier than I would have been in the Middle Ages even if I didn't get caught in the wrong speculation. We have nicer bathrooms. I wonder whether anyone foresaw them, back then?"[26]

Distinctions:

Seuin in Japan for best novelette "Unicorn Variation"
Locus Award for collection *Unicorn Variations*
Daicon in Japan for *Unicorn Variations*
Balrog for best collection *Unicorn Variations*

————1985————

Plagiarism

In 1985 Zelazny encountered plagiarism twice. In the first instance, a high school student won a state-wide contest by submitting a Zelazny story as his own, and the incident gained nation-wide coverage. The afterword to "The George Business" in volume 4 provides more details.

The second episode involved the first book of the new Amber series and also received national exposure. "The first of the new Amber series, *Trumps of Doom*, had a plagiarized cover. The guy who did it was just out of art school, and he'd taken on a commission to do about three covers in a week, and I guess he had just burned out on ideas. So he took Michael Whelan's cover for *Brother Berserker* [aka *Brother Assassin,* Ace 1978 reprint] by Fred Saberhagen, airbrushed it around a little bit, changed some of the colors, and sent it in."[27] "Just thought he'd pull something at random and change it a little bit and get away with it, not knowing he was ripping off possibly the best known artist in the area."[28]

Arbor House, publisher of *Trumps of Doom,* "bought it and printed it. When I got the book, I thought the cover looked sort of familiar. And my son walked by and said, 'That cover looks kind of familiar.' Fred Saberhagen happens to be a good friend of mine, and I'd walked past a print of the original in his back hall all the time. In fact, I had read the book.

"So the publisher got a telephone call from Michael Whelan's attorney just a few days after the book was out, saying, 'You realize that's a plagiarized cover?' Usually a publisher would give you some argument over something like that, saying, 'You've got to talk to our attorneys and see if *they* think it's a plagiarized cover.' But they got a copy of Saberhagen's book and held it next to *Trumps of Doom* and said, 'Yeah, that's a plagiarized cover. How much do you want?' I don't know what he got in the way of a settlement. But then, after he agreed to take a certain amount of money for damages, they said, 'Well, now that we've got the thing, and we've spent all this money advertising the book with this cover on it, how much more do you want to let us go on using it? We don't want to change the cover at this point.'

"So that was my only Michael Whelan cover. I got it by way of plagiarism. I was at San Diego Comicon last fall, and they gave out these Inkpot Awards, and I was supposed to give one to Michael Whelan as a last minute sort of thing. So I got up and told the story of my only Michael Whelan cover, which went over quite well. I wish I could get a real Michael Whelan cover under the proper circumstances for the proper story. That would be something and a half."[27]

Zelazny never saw his wish fulfilled. A 2003 ibooks edition of *To Die in Italbar* reprinted a Whelan painting on its cover, but that wasn't an original commission. The editors of this collection shared Zelazny's remarks with Michael Whelan, and to their delight, he agreed to paint the dust jacket art for this six-volume collection. Thus, Zelazny's "something and a half" wish for a genuine Michael Whelan cover has come true at last.

Zelazny himself was accused of plagiarism. In one incident a fan wrote to him, saying how much he had enjoyed *Eye of Cat* but claiming that Zelazny had ripped off a story the fan had written for a writing class supervised by writer Tony Hillerman. "But the fellow said he'd feel encouraged as a writer if I would tell him Tony had shown me the story and I had copied parts of it. I wrote back to him and said something like, 'Would you also like me to label the letter exhibit A? But no, I never heard of you until I received your letter, and I'd like to keep it that way.' "[28] That experience, others like it, and his attorney's advice led him to return all manuscripts, unread, to his readers. His habit had been to give advice to anyone who took the time to write to him. Having to return the unopened manuscripts bothered him, because he knew how hard it was for novice writers to get published.

"Permafrost"

"Permafrost" began much as "Unicorn Variation" did, springing in part from an Alaskan cruise in May 1980. Details appear in that story's afterword. "Permafrost" confirmed Zelazny's proficiency with stories of intermediate length. A lover's quarrel becomes fresh and compelling, enriched by allusion. As explained in the story's afterword, "Permafrost" demonstrates how he patiently percolated ideas before using them, years later.

Allusions can be dangerous. If the images of a leopard on a mountaintop and a limp watch on a tree don't work for a reader, they might simply annoy or perplex (see the afterword to the story). A *New York Times* reviewer said, "Sandwiched between [the opening and closing allusions that frame the story] is a brief tale about love and hatred and redemption that never really engages the issues it raises, because all the people in it (and not just those who are officially dead) remain lifeless stereotypes. Perhaps Mr. Zelazny was too pleased with his framing apparatus of allusions and ironies to notice that even a postmodernist fable needs more than a handful of trendy narrative tricks to 'make it new.' "[29]

Despite that denunciation, "Permafrost" won the readers' approval and reaffirmed Zelazny's mastery of short fiction. "Permafrost" won the Hugo for Best Novelette, was a finalist for the Nebula, and placed #5 on the Locus Poll for novelette.

Priests of the Absurd

Zelazny speaks about writing:

"There comes a point—and I don't know precisely where it occurs—when you've been around long enough and are sufficiently well-known that you sell everything you write. If I want to try something experimental I do it in confidence that it will appear somewhere. I no longer even think of something not selling."[30]

Did his study of Elizabethan drama for his M.A. influence his style? "One of the reasons I elected to do my thesis in that area is that I felt a certain attraction for the tragedies of blood and revenge."[7] "Somebody asked me...if that was why there was so much gore and violence in my writings. Elizabethan theater. I've never thought of it that way but there may be something to that. To go back a step further, why I kinda like Elizabethan theater: all those delightful ways of poisoning people... I suppose it did influence my style somewhat. I suppose you've got a certain period where things you read can influence you readily. Then you come to a point where your style is your own and it takes off from there... I think I've passed that stage where I was influenced too much. It stopped when I was around 27. I suppose a lot of people who started writing sooner probably had it crystallize earlier."[31] "You reach a point eventually, once you've begun writing, where your thought processes and feelings sort of...harden, and then take off on their own track, so that you no longer seem open to influences in ways you were before...once you've got [your own style], it seems you develop antibodies of some sort, to protect it."[7]

"If I were in the process of counseling a would-be sf writer, I would say to him, 'you need a sense of humor and a sense of place. You need a sense of history and a sense of time. You need a sense of science and a sense of the human condition. You need a sense of the fear, shame and mocking laughter, which for want of a better word I'll call the guilt involved in being a man. But most of all, you need a sense of humor.' And assuming that the guy knows how to put words together at all, I think he'll probably make it on the scene, along with the rest of us priests of the absurd, time-keepers of the never-to-be-calendared occasion."[32]

"[Robert] Silverberg came up to me at Tricon [1966 in Cleveland] and said, 'Don't try to write like Hemingway, Zelazny. Too many people write like Hemingway.' I don't know as this last part tells you more about me than it does about sf, but I have spoken to other writers and they do seem to be giving more thought to the particular tack they will take in a story."[31]

"I still write in the same position [reclined, with a portable typewriter on his lap]. Then I have a round coffee table on this side of me on which I keep the manuscripts, and a big dictionary on the floor beside me here, and an ashtray, and I have a 32-cup coffee pot on the table which I have set with an electric timer to go on in the morning before I wake up so there's always hot coffee there. And I sit like that four times a day. I made myself a rule. I promise myself that four times a day I would write three sentences. And four chances a day, about ten words each, that's under twenty words minimum that I can get done. Actually in the course of writing the three sentences I can usually think of a fourth one and it carries on for a while and I'll get a page or so written. Then whenever I feel like stopping I don't feel bad about it 'cause I'll say, 'well, I got my three sentences.' ...I get up kinda late because I stay up late and I go downstairs and drink coffee and read the paper and by then the mailman comes. Then I read the mail. And then I'll go out and poke around the yard or something or I'll go upstairs or I'll go to the bank... Then I write those three sentences and then I knock off and goof off 'til around dinner time and then I run up and try to write three more sentences so I won't have to write too long and let dinner come along and interrupt it. Then, oh, I'll usually watch the news—a little viewing—find excuses for not going back upstairs to work for a long time 'cause I realize I have two more periods in which to get three sentences each and I'll finally find a break and dash up and I'll write three sentences and hopefully hook myself into writing another page or so. Then once that's done, I tear out of the room and I usually sit and read. Awful lot of reading to do when I don't want to write. Then it gets to be about two in the morning and I realize I haven't written the final three sentences so I go up and work at that—and that's usually the time it catches on, unfortunately, so I'm sitting up there with my writing and then I go to bed and sleep late and start the whole thing again. But it usually ends up 1,000 words a day that way."[31]

"I don't know what it is, but there is a point—and it's not anything quantifiable; I can't tell you page such-and-such, or after so many words—but there comes a point in various books, a point where everything falls together, and you see where the entire thing is heading. From that point on, the writing is extremely easy. Almost a matter of transcribing something."[7]

Thoughts about His Children

In 1985 Zelazny described his children's attendance at SF conventions. "They have a particularly good time at the one we go to regularly in Dallas. They had a scavenger hunt at the convention this summer, and one of the items to bring back was a Zelazny kid. Someone came up to me and said, 'Can I borrow one of your kids for a minute?' My son Trent decided he was going to charge him a quarter. He's going to be the businessman in the family."[33]

On having a famous dad, he said, "Oh, it's just something that they grew up with. It seems natural to them that I should have a typewriter and be using it a lot. Once they saw my name on books, they realized it was my name, that I was the author. They became pretty blasé about it. They just know that's what I do."[33] Later, "Oh, they started reading [my books]. They alleged a liking for the ones they've read, so I don't know."[27] His son Trent did not really appreciate his father's writing until after he'd died. Trent grieved that he'd never be able to tell his father that he really enjoyed it.[34] Concerning his siblings, Trent said, "I can't speak for my brother [Devin] on this one. My sister [Shannon] loves his work, especially Amber, *A Dark Traveling*, *Changeling* and *Madwand*."[35]

In 1969 when Zelazny had only Devin, he said, "I would not want my son to be a writer. It is a nerve-wracking, painful, time-consuming, miserable, rotten thing to be engaged in while you're doing it. Once it's finished, it's a tremendous feeling that you have. You say, well, I've done it. And then you see your book published, and you're tremendously happy over it, but it is a very emotional thing. I recently saw a doctor over the fact that I have a lousy appetite, and he said, 'I believe your stomach is the victim of an artistic temperament.' And I suppose this does play a part in it. But with respect to whether I'd do it over again, the answer is yes, I love it."

The interviewer clarified, "You love it, but you would not want your children to do it." And Zelazny replied, "Right."[36]

Trent did become a writer. As of 2009 he had published several short stories, had worked on a screenplay for his dad's *A Night in the Lonesome October*, had finished his first novel, *Destination Unknown*, and was adapting the Amber stories for a comic book series (the project died). Trent reported then, "Shannon is currently in medical school in Seattle and loving it… She has also been helping me out on certain Amber projects I'm currently doing… Devin runs a bookstore (I think he loves it). I write, work odd jobs, and have one child, a son, Corwin Random Zelazny, born 6/26/1996."[35]

Family Life

After Shannon was born, Judy Zelazny studied law at the University of New Mexico and graduated in 1985. She then worked at the New Mexico Court of Appeals and the State Supreme Court. Her studies and employment as a lawyer required shifts in Zelazny's schedule. Trent recalled that his dad "usually took the kids to school and picked us up once my mother was in law school and working. This gave him a big block of time to write during the day, though he did also often write late at night."[35]

Changes developed gradually as the couple's careers took them in divergent directions professionally and socially. Zelazny was irritated that Judy never read his work, considered science fiction and fantasy unimportant, and thought that his writer acquaintances were juvenile.[37–40] Gregory Benford said, "He told me once that she had not read anything of his, just considered writing his job. After that I wondered if she ever sensed his wit, for she never seemed to laugh at his often subtle jokes, even after our round of double margaritas."[40] Zelazny perceived that Judy's colleagues at the State Supreme Court disdained him as a mere "sci-fi" writer.[37]

Amber Games

In 1985, with the home computer in its infancy, a *Nine Princes in Amber* computer game was developed and sold well. By today's standards it is clunky and archaic. Nevertheless, out of print copies in fine condition can command very good prices at auction. The Amber series would be well suited to today's advanced graphics.

An Amber Encyclopedia

In 1985 Theodore Krulik, who had just finished writing a Zelazny biography and critique that appeared in 1986, proposed an encyclopedia of the Amber universe. "[Zelazny] was so enthusiastic about the prospect that he introduced me to his editor at Avon Books. As a result, I was given a book contract, spent the next eight years writing it with Roger as consultant, and Avon published *The Complete Amber Sourcebook* in 1996. As I worked on the sourcebook, Roger reviewed each section and contributed details that do not appear anywhere in his novels. For instance, Roger told me that Corwin had obtained his sword Grayswandir from the Phantom Smith of Tir-na Nog'th, a character who is never mentioned in the *Chronicles of Amber*."[33]

The sourcebook was published in 1996 after Zelazny's death. It drew criticism for containing elements that did not appear in the novels or seemed to contradict them. Many fans felt that the *Amber Sourcebook* was not "canon" but represented Krulik's own additions or interpretations. Since the book was published posthumously, Zelazny could not clarify. The Zelazny archives at Syracuse University contain sections of Krulik's manuscript, which he mailed to Zelazny at intervals for nearly a decade. These items contain no replies or revisions from Zelazny.

Book Published:

Trumps of Doom

——————1986——————

More in the Martial Arts

Wanting to master a martial art that required no partner, Zelazny trained in *t'ai chi* for two years under Wasentha Young. Young often enlisted him to teach the beginning *t'ai chi* students.[12]

Ghostwheel, *Blood of Amber* and *Sign of Chaos*

Unlike the first five Amber books, written episodically over a decade, Zelazny wrote the Merlin books almost back-to-back. He wrote the second set of Amber novels quickly, without an outline and without reviewing what he had written before. As a result, critics and fans complained that the novels' plots were confusing or missing altogether. The Merlin tales addressed some contradictions in the first five Amber novels, but they also introduced new material that seemed to refute the old. Nevertheless, the novels sold very well; *Blood of Amber* placed #2 and *Sign of Chaos* was #3 in the Locus Poll for best fantasy novel in their respective years.

Zelazny completed the first draft of *Ghostwheel* (renamed *Blood of Amber*) on November 7, 1985, at 9:44 p.m.[41] First and final drafts are nearly identical, confirming his claim that he wrote only one draft for most novels.[41] In *Blood of Amber* the man with the "nasty looking scar running both above and below his left eye" may look familiar.[42] This is a cameo of Grimjack, John Ostrander's comic book hero. Zelazny enjoyed the comics, wrote a fan letter that was published in issue #39 (October 1987) of *Grimjack*, and later penned an introduction to the 1989 Grimjack graphic novel, *Demon Knight.*[43]

Thoughts on Creative Writing

Zelazny had been a professional writer for over twenty-three years when *Trumps of Doom* came out. An interviewer asked him if a Master's in English differentiated him from sf authors who had a scientific background. "This might be one of the things that caused me to focus more on character, initially, than ideas. In another sense, it caused me to realize that I needed certain materials I didn't have then: it resulted in my doing a lot of reading in technical areas. But for some reason, there seems to be a big distinction between my short material and my longer material. My shorter pieces tend to be of a technical or scientific nature, whereas my longer stories focus more on character."[3] In another interview he said that his training in literature exposed him to techniques (stream of consciousness, emphasis on character, unusual narrative forms, etc.), untried in science fiction when he entered the field in the 1960s. "So my literary training was a virtue."[12]

He differentiated writing short stories and novels. "When I'm doing a short story, I tend to see the whole thing in its entirety from the beginning. With a novel, I usually start with about 25 percent of what's really going to happen in mind, and I develop the rest of it as I go along. I see certain high points toward which I'm heading, but incidents develop as I'm watching. There were a good many surprises for me while I was working with Amber."[3]

Does a story spring from an idea or a character? "With a novel, generally it's a character. I'll quite often have the character before I have the story, and I'll try it out in a situation until something falls into place and I can begin writing. It's more with shorter pieces that I start from just an idea or a setting. But, with anything at length, it seems the people come to me first."[3]

Zelazny elaborated in another interview. "With my novels, I tend to think of the characters first. The story begins to develop as I try these characters in different situations. With shorter fiction I generally get the idea first and then develop a character to fit whatever it is that I want to do. As to the original addresses of the characters and ideas, I do not know. I simply encounter them mentally and proceed from there to extend our acquaintanceships."[44]

But characters sometimes had a mind of their own. "I occasionally have a strange (nonnegotiable) labor problem: The wrong character will sometimes turn up and refuse to leave, staging a sit-down strike on the premises, *i.e.*, the idea. I know they belong in another story, and they're ruining the one they're trying to take over. Will they listen? No. It's like something out of Pirandello."[45] [In Luigi Pirandello's 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the story begins with actors reluctantly rehearsing their parts, only to have characters who have been rejected by their author appear on stage and interfere with the main story.] Carl Yoke said, "He told me once that if you woke up every morning thinking about a story, then you were a writer. The idea wasn't his, I forget where he told me it came from originally, but it was him. He was willing to suffer for his writing in ways that I wasn't."[46]

Zelazny intuitively integrated character and plot. "Basically, my approach to writing a novel is to construct a character. Once I have a character, I try him out in several situations just to see how he reacts. Then I take two situations that strike me as interesting. I begin near one of them and write my way through, almost free-associating, to the second situation. In the course of this progress from one to the other, secondary characters necessarily occur and a certain amount of background material is sketched in. By the time I have traveled from point A to point B, I have some of the secondary characters become major characters. I can see some direction in which to go and I simply begin moving. Then there comes a point somewhere along the way where I see the entire book laid out before me... I am basically a subconscious plotter."[47]

But there were occasions when he'd plot even a short story in great detail. "Sometimes when I'm using a little more science I stop and plot harder. Now the story 'Kjwalll'kje'k'koothaïlll'kje'k,' the dolphin story, I plotted every single thing in it out to a 't.' All I had to do was sit down and write that. So I do about three days just pacing, listening to folk songs, and whenever I plot I have to have music. I have to pace and listen to music. Usually it can't be classical. It has to be folk. I don't know why. I pace and I plot and when the whole thing is plotted, then I can't have any music or it distracts me. So I have to keep it silent. But then I can write very fast if I plot. Only when it's things like the Amber books I don't have a plot because it's more fun on a novel not knowing how it's going to end. It keeps you interested in it as you go along."[31]

Self-Destructing Nebulas

Legend has it that Zelazny's Nebula Awards had self-destructed, and that legend is based on fact. "Actually, I've had several [Nebula trophies self-destruct]. Two I lent to a library in a cold northern city, which were in the trunk of a car caught in a traffic jam. When they were taken indoors, the coefficient of expansion between imbedded quartz and Lucite differed sufficiently that a series of cracks ran through the Lucite after they'd been inside a while. These were stripped down and repaired. When I moved from the East Coast to New Mexico, I didn't trust the movers with the Nebulas because they were pretty fragile, so I had them in a carton in the back seat of my car. I left them in the car overnight when I stayed in a motel in Arkansas. This was in January, so it got pretty cold. The next day it warmed up considerably, and I cracked them myself. So if there's any moral to be drawn from it, a big temperature change is not good for Nebulas."[3]

Poetry versus Prose

Zelazny explained how an idea became a poem, not a story. "Usually, it's an image accompanied by just a small group of words—five or six at most—that go together in a manner in which I would not ordinarily write them in a story. Generally, the image or phrase will run through my mind for a day, and something tells me, 'This is a poem.' No other part ever comes as easily as that phrase or the image. It's a kind of theater of the subconscious."[3]

Crafting a poem was intense; he could spend a day writing and rewriting a poem that might not span a page.[48]

Although he kept his personal life out of his prose, it did emerge in his poetry. "I realized that I have different feelings for the categories of poetry Aristotle describes as lyric—that being written in immediate relationship to the author—and dramatic—that being done in mediate relationship between author & audience. I realized that for me the distinction between the 'difficult' mindset of poetry & an 'easier' one of prose is a measure of personal involvement, of closeness to my own psyche."[49]

Fan Letters

Zelazny received reams of fan letters; many divide into two categories. The largest number came from Amber fans who only wanted more Corwin stories. Tales featuring his son Merlin didn't appease them, and they disliked the long intervals between books. Many letters requested further details about Castle Amber, the colors and genealogy of other characters, why the Amberites had so few children despite being near-immortal, and so forth. Some fans held him responsible for "not making" a film of the Amber series. The second group of letters came from fans of his science fiction and fantasy apart from Amber. These fans were often impatient with what they felt was Amber's lighter, more commercial fare. Letters demanded to know his religion, his political views, whether he was still a bachelor and would like to meet (both men and women inquiring), whether he was into bondage and other sexual practices, where he got his ideas, how to become a writer, how to pronounce his name (Zuh—LAZZ—knee), and whether he would qualify for membership in Mensa (Yes, but he let his membership lapse).[50] Others chastised him for his portrayal of women, like the fan who praised *Doorways in the Sand* but added, "all the fun in your future is limited to males. The only women in the story are a sex object, and a victim of men's animosity to men: not much change from the past few thousand years. O well, it was good reading anyway."[51] Zelazny eventually wrote stronger female characters.

At first he replied to most correspondents, including this biographer, to whom he sent his best wishes, an update on his travels, and a set of signed bookplates.[52] Eventually, in the introduction to the 1989 collection *Frost & Fire*, he declared, "the amount of mail I've been receiving from readers has picked up quite a bit recently, and there is simply no way that I can respond to it and still conduct my life in a relatively sane fashion. I can no longer even attempt to answer questions about my work, myself, my feelings on particular matters. I simply want to say thank you, here and now, to those who've taken the time to drop me a line. I wish I had more time, too."[45]

The letters continued, and he responded to some. He discarded some fan letters and wrote first drafts on the backs of others. Many wound up in boxes, now in the Archives at Syracuse University or University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Collectors purchased others along with the rest of his correspondence.

He heard from some very strange fans.

His self-proclaimed biggest fan wrote that he intended to *become* Zelazny in every way, to write his stories, receive his awards, live in his house, be his children's father and Judy's husband, and so forth. It is unclear whether Zelazny ever responded.

One letter demanded that all Amber books be completely rewritten to delete all references to the Pattern and the Logrus and to remove all suggestions of sex between characters. This letter enumerated *approved* elements for Zelazny to add. He had to complete these revisions *immediately*, or he would suffer consequences.

Another fan wrote, "Earth's natural moon is gone. Incandescent balloon replicas are being used to replace it. This evil *fact* should be in textbooks, but isn't. Now what are *you* going to do about this?"[53]

Some letters insisted that, because the fan had read all of his books, Zelazny was obligated to read the enclosed manuscript, provide detailed guidance, and get it published. "So I asked my attorney what I should do, and he said whenever anybody sends you a story, just return it with a covering letter stating I'm returning your story unread because my attorney will not permit me to read anything that is uncopyrighted and unpublished. He said I should not read anything unless I was in a formal teaching situation, was editing something, or perhaps was judging a contest. So I made a practice not to do it after that."[28]

An eleventh-grader wrote on April 9, 1979, asking permission to continue the saga of Dilvish the Deliverer, whom he felt Zelazny had "abandoned in the 1960s." He wanted Zelazny to provide him with any "story notes, names, outlines and plots" and to evaluate the novel in detail before he would submit it to market. He promised to take only 10% of the book's sales and to give the rest to Zelazny.[54] Since an author's royalties were then about 10% of sales, the student actually offered to keep it all. Zelazny's gracious April 20 reply stated that the request to continue the series was "flattering" but no longer necessary because "the series is no longer dormant…I was…recently persuaded to continue it myself." Wishing the student luck with his writing, he added, "The only advice I can give anyone on writing is to try to do it regularly."[55]

Perhaps the shortest and most endearing fan letter simply said, "Mr. Zelazny, Never die."[56] His reply was equally short: "Thank you."[57]

Roger Zelazny by Theodore Krulik

By 1986 several bibliographies and critiques of Zelazny's work were in print. Both Carl Yoke's *Roger Zelazny: Starmont Reader's Guide* (1979) and Joseph Sanders' *Roger Zelazny: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (1980) combined biography and literary critique. Daniel Levacks's *Amber Dreams* (1983) was a comprehensive bibliography that included commentary from Zelazny, assembled from earlier interviews. Theodore Krulik's book *Roger Zelazny* appeared in 1986, incorporating biography, literary critique, and conversation from Krulik's interviews of the author at his home. Critics dismissed the book as lightweight.[49,58,59] The author's opening statement that "in pursuing my research for this book, I found it virtually impossible to separate the man from his writing"[4] did not help. This and other remarks—"the reader cannot ignore the fact that much of what is seen of Corwin is Zelazny"[4]—implied that Krulik thought Corwin was Zelazny himself. These statements damaged Krulik's credibility, for none of Zelazny's acquaintances had trouble distinguishing the "emaciated, ascetic-looking," and shy Zelazny from the muscular, outgoing, and sexy Corwin.[49,60–62] When *The Complete Amber Sourcebook* appeared in 1996, Krulik wrote, "Even as a small boy, Roger resembled Oberon's son Corwin… He was also lean in body and tall for his age."[63] Zelazny considered himself of average height growing up; his adult height was 5 foot 11 inches.[64]

Distinctions:

Nebula nomination for novella "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai"
Hugo for novella "24 Views of Mt Fuji, by Hokusai"
Locus Award for fantasy novel *Trumps of Doom*
Locus Poll novella #5: "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai"
Lazar Komarčić Award (best foreign science fiction novel translated into Serbo-Croatian) for *Damnation Alley*

Book Published:

Blood of Amber

1987

A Dark Traveling

In 1987 publication of Zelazny's two children's books—*Here There Be Dragons* and *Way Up High*—was still in limbo. Although many people characterized *Doorways in the Sand* as a novel for young adults, he hadn't aimed it at that audience. From time to time publishers approached him to write a proper young adult novel. "Last year I had the opportunity to write a juvenile—or, as they seem to be calling them these days, young adult—novel, and I said yes… I decided that I would do things differently if I ever wrote a book in the area. I felt that something interesting might be done with a parallel worlds theme—a thing not quite the same as time travel, but which bears it some intriguing resemblance."[65] He did nothing at that time because he was busy and "because I will not write a book on spec. And I was certainly not about to seek a deal when I was so busy."[65]

Shortly after he said that, a publisher approached him. They planned a series of young adult novels which would explore the "great themes of science fiction." Would he be interested in participating? Intrigued, Zelazny responded that he might tackle the parallel worlds theme, a subject not on the publisher's list. Without actually committing to the project, he inquired about the particulars and promised to let them know. To his surprise, he then spent the rest of the day writing the first chapter, calling it an experiment to see if he could do it. He created a 14-year-old boy as the first person narrator, finding it relatively easy because Devin was that age. "And yes, I suppose that being the father of a 14-year-old son helped somewhat in this regard; and no, while I gave him an electric razor last Christmas, I've never seen him use it on the palms of his hands."[65] That 14-year-old character was James Wiley, a werewolf.

James speaks at the beginning, "My father was the keeper of the Eddystone Light," a reference to a Cornish sea chantey performed by (among others) Peter, Paul & Mary. It tells of a real lighthouse that the sea has destroyed many times.[66] The opening stanza says, "My father was the keeper of the Eddystone Light; || He courted a mermaid one fine night. || From this union there came three || A porpoise and a porgy and the other was me." The Wiley family in Zelazny's tale is a similar collection of characters. The parents are Agatha and Tom; he is keeper of the transcomp that allows travel across parallel worlds. Their children are James, werewolf and narrator; adopted daughter Becky, a sorceress; and Dave, who has been temporarily replaced in an exchange program by Barry, assassin and martial arts student. Zelazny posited a limited number of parallel worlds, each the result of a major branch point in history, "and that they are tunable in terms of this device [transcomp] which permits travel between them. The presumption being that it's pretty hard to create a parallel world."[67]

Zelazny dreamed about the story that night. Over the next several days, he outlined the novel and wrote the second and third chapters. He then called the publisher and agreed to write the story under contract. Because it was a children's book and he was following strict guidelines, he kept all violence offstage, including the climactic battle between villain Crow and Uncle George. Carl Yoke later declared that by doing so, "Zelazny has pretty much destroyed reader interest."[66] Another constraint was the word limit. After creating several memorable characters, Zelazny could not use their abilities to resolve the conflict—James never uses his shape-shifting abilities, and "assassin" Barry never uses his martial arts. Nevertheless, Zelazny finished the novel on schedule, and, having learned from the experience, he was pleased with it. To his dismay, he later discovered that his learning process—at least concerning young adult novels—was incomplete.

"Publishers of books for young people seem to rely on marketing studies in a manner I had never before encountered. This led to editorial objections which would never have occurred to a novice in the area such as myself: Becky was too young. It was pointed out to me that girls as well as boys would be reading the book, and while 12 to 14-year-old male readers would have no trouble with 14-year-old Tom and 15-year-old Barry, marketing studies indicated that there would be little female reader identification with 11-year-old Becky."[65]

So Zelazny had to alter Becky's age, which was easier said than done. "Wait a minute. You do not make an 11-year-old into a 14-year-old simply by saying that is the case. Doing this required my sitting down and thinking through Becky's entire role in the story, then picking up a copy of the MS with a pencil in my hand, as I realized that there were things an 11-year-old would cry over which a 14-year-old would not, as I realized that certain vocabulary changes were in order and that a more complex pattern of action required demonstration at certain key points."[65]

The publisher wanted a prologue. Zelazny did not. He had to give in—"In fact, I wrote it in about an hour—mad—knocking it off as hard copy, which I stuffed into an envelope and mailed without even giving it a re-reading. This is where I learned another lesson. The lesson is: Never Do That."[65]

He later discovered that in the prologue he had described a "dark-haired man clad in black... His hair was long and black." "I almost choked because my personal writing religion holds economy of statement to be a high virtue and unnecessary repetition to be a sign of spiritual malaise...he did not have to be dark-haired *and* have hair that was black." Unfortunately, the book was rushed into print; he did not receive the customary proofs to review, and the copy editors did not catch the mistake. He remained fond of the book "save for an embarrassing amount of black hair and dark hair on page 2." He hoped the paperback edition would correct the mistake, but if the paperback were simply photo-offset rather than re-set from the hardcover, the repetition would remain. "Consequently, my petty dark redundancy may well endure as long as the book itself, to the last time of its recorded syllables, so to speak."[65]

The paperback text was reset—and reset again for the UK hardcover *A Dark Travelling* from Hutchinson—but the mistake remained. Zelazny said that writing this book taught him a lot, "the most useful for me being that when in doubt and a hurry the simplest means of determining style is to let the viewpoint character do it for you... Most importantly, though, I've learned that Oscar Wilde was right: Sometimes the most gratifying way of dealing with a really fine temptation is to yield to it."[65]

Alien Speedway

Byron Preiss approached Zelazny in 1985. This time several authors, sharing a world and story arc, would write a series of linked young-adult or juvenile novels. Zelazny outlined the characters, spacecraft, storyline and solar system needed for the ultimate race track in outer space. "I gave it considerable thought and, strangely, I put most of it to paper at the Santa Fe ski basin, over endless cups of hot chocolate and many donuts, occasionally looking up to watch the glissandos of dark or brightly clad people descending the slopes. It was a fine place to work on something like this, because of the mood as well as the view. People were constantly coming and going, talking about the condition of the slopes, about accidents, about equipment. Very strangely, at one point, Richard Sealey came in from skiing and stopped to ask me what the hell I was doing scribbling away there...he used to race professionally himself, as well as being an experienced pit-man. I told him a bit about the idea, which he found intriguing, and he kindly offered me the loan of a number of interesting-sounding books on auto racing. The need for them did not really arise, as it turned out, but I tend to take any kind of synchronicity on the eve of a project as something of a good omen. The mood continued and I kept writing. I did not finish the work that day, but returned to the same place later to complete it, solely because the atmosphere there seemed right for it."[68] This ultimate race track became the setting for a coming-of-age tale about a young man and his great desire to go there and win.

A visual artist (Hayashi) signed on to design the spacecraft, and two writers (Jeffrey Carver and Thomas Wylde) contracted to write the first three books, based on Zelazny's outline. Although *Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway* was originally planned to run six books, only three came out in 1987 and 1988. Zelazny wrote an introduction to each volume, discussing how he designed the series in the first book,[68] the evolution of artificial intelligence in the second,[69] and Jules Verne in the third.[70] He wrote these essays before the series was prematurely canceled, promising in the third to discuss mankind's "love affair with the machine...at greater length next time around the track."[70] The first novel holds fairly close to his outline, but the other two do not, and the characters are inconsistent from book to book.

This volume (number 5 of this collection) includes Zelazny's previously unpublished plot and character outline, given to the writers and artist. Zelazny dabbled in the *Alien Speedway* universe himself but disguised it in "Deadboy Donner and the Filstone Cup" (also included in this collection).

Amber Continues to Grow

Releasing the Merlin series fostered interest in other spin-offs. The publishers wanted Zelazny to license other authors to write tales of Amber. But he was loath to do this, having said many times that he would never permit anyone to use the Amber characters or settings. However, Erick Wujcik was developing the *Amber Diceless Role-Playing Game* at that time, and after its release in 1991 Zelazny authorized Wujcik to include fan fiction—strictly written as role-playing game accounts—in the associated magazine *Amberzine.*

"When I began writing *Nine Princes in Amber* I had no idea that it was the beginning of a series, let alone a series that would produce spinoffs such as the computer game, the board game, and a book such as this," the children's choose-your-own-adventure *Seven No-Trump* by Neil Randall. Zelazny allowed Randall limited involvement in a children's adventure book only. Ground rules dictated that "it would have to involve considerable thought with regard to the original author's intent in all of these areas [characters, themes, settings]—preserving the characters' integrity by means of behavior consistent with what had gone before—and it could not produce any major upheavals or discordant departures from the preexisting story line. In other words, it would pretty much require a smallish but significant incident apart from the general flow of narrative I've been running."[71]

He allowed Randall to do two such books, *Seven No-Trump: Crossroads Adventure in the World of Roger Zelazny's Amber* and *Combat Command in the World of Roger Zelazny's Nine Princes in Amber: The Black Road War.* Both appeared in 1988 with introductions by Zelazny, and they remain obscure collectible items.

In "Amber and the Amberites," Zelazny's preface to *The Black Road War,* he discusses the problematic genealogy of the characters (reprinted in volume 4 of this collection). Fans had noted discrepancies between *Nine Princes in Amber* and *Sign of the Unicorn.* In the former Corwin says that he and Random have the same mother, but he and Eric do not; in the latter it is the other way around. Zelazny replied to many fans, telling each that they were the first to notice. In "Amber and the Amberites," he offered his favorite excuse: "Merlin had every right to wonder as he did (in *Sign of Chaos*) just how edited—either intentionally or unconsciously—his father's tale might have been. I personally feel that because Corwin was still suffering from amnesia and trauma at that point he indulged in some wishful thinking and actually believed it to be the case; *i.e.*, he felt closer then to Random, who was helping him, and would rather be a half-brother than a full brother to Eric, whom he disliked."[72] He also blamed uncertainties about Oberon's genealogy and the founding of Amber on the fact that "Dworkin was insane for many years and the Unicorn isn't talking."[72]

Distinctions:

Nebula nomination for novelette "Permafrost"
Hugo for novelette "Permafrost"
Locus Poll fantasy novel #2: *Blood of Amber*
Locus Poll novelette #5: "Permafrost"
Locus Poll all-time best sf novel #11: *Lord of Light*
Locus Poll all-time best fantasy novel #7: *Nine Princes in Amber*
Locus Poll #10 all-time best sf novelist
Locus Poll #6 all-time best fantasy novelist
Locus Poll #7 all-time best novelist

Books Published:

Sign of Chaos
A Dark Traveling
Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway: Clypsis by Jeffrey A. Carver

1988

Colterglass

Author and storyteller Gerald Hausman was fascinated by myths and stories of the American Indians. In spring 1988, while visiting The Community School in Sun Valley, Idaho, he revisited the tale of "mountain man" John Colter. In 1809 Blackfeet Indians captured Colter and his partner John Potts. They killed Potts. After the Indians stripped Colter naked, they let him run to freedom—a 150 mile journey, with death almost certain during the first few minutes as he fled armed Blackfeet warriors. Hausman also discovered the story of Hugh Glass; mauled by a bear and left for dead by his companions, he managed to *crawl* over a hundred miles back to civilization. One day over coffee with Zelazny, Hausman told him Colter's story; he later decided to research and write it himself. After Hausman completed the first chapter, Zelazny visited him in Tesuque, New Mexico. "I had it on the computer screen when Roger was having coffee after dinner. He stepped into my studio and read the first line.

After which, he sat down and read the chapter, saying afterwards, "This is really good."[73]

Hausman recalled that he immediately invited Zelazny to collaborate. He explained how the novel intertwined the stories of Colter's escape and Hugh Glass's hundred mile crawl. "Roger's interest seemed to cool before my eyes. He told me that he had too much to do, contracts to fulfill for books as yet unwritten, and there was just no time for this one. 'Maybe in a few years,' he said. Then he changed the subject…"[74]

Zelazny's recollection differed. "It's a double story line. The whole thing was [Hausman's] idea. He came over one afternoon and we were having coffee. He said 'I want to tell you about a book.' I said, 'Don't do it, it'll take the edge off and you'll never write it.' He said, 'No, I want to tell you about this.' It was a pair of interwoven stories involving two mountain men in the early nineteenth century. It sounded neat. It was one of the few times in my life that I ever felt it would be nice to steal someone else's idea. So what I would do, I decided, was wait a few years and ask Gerry if he'd ever written it. If he said no, I'd offer to buy it from him. But when we finished our coffee he said, 'would you be interested in writing it with me?' I said yes right away."[75]

Hausman continued to research Colter and Glass, but two years passed before Zelazny began the second chapter, and it was longer still before work began in earnest. Similar to the collaboration on *Deus Irae*, *Colterglass* developed through intermittent exchanges over several years and did not see print as *Wilderness* until 1994.

Roger Zelazny's Visual Guide to Castle Amber

Zelazny authorized the *Visual Guide* and, according to the book's introduction, spent four days in interviews to flesh out aspects of the Castle, the characters, and the world. He said, "My parts of the book were dictated and transcribed."[27] Bill Fawcett organized it, Neil Randall wrote the text, and artists Todd Cameron Hamilton and James Clouse created character portraits and maps, respectively.

The result was a beautiful book that prompted heated discussions among Amber fans. Wherever the *Visual Guide* conflicted with the novels or with what they thought should have been, some fans assumed that Randall had invented the information. Therefore, it was not "canon." Many fans also had preconceived notions of Corwin's and Eric's appearance and disliked Hamilton's illustrations. The criticisms were largely unfair; Zelazny himself was inconsistent when writing the Amber novels and probably just as inconsistent when interviewed for the *Visual Guide.* Moreover, Hamilton sketched the Trumps and revised the drawings with Zelazny's feedback; therefore, the Trumps in the *Visual Guide* are probably closest to the author's vision.[49]

Zelazny faulted the *Visual Guide* for stating that Delwin and Sand were the children of Oberon and Lora when in fact *Blood of Amber* noted they were the children of Oberon and Harla.[76] However, the mistake was evidently Zelazny's—he'd written Oberon and Lora in the essay "Amber and the Amberites," and he'd apparently stated the same in the *Visual Guide* interviews. The error likely came from his reliance on memory rather than keeping notes. Any further clarification about details in the *Visual Guide* is impossible today.

Whether Zelazny liked the *Visual Guide* is unknown, but it is clear that he didn't appreciate being bound by it. He disliked working with outlines, and he certainly disdained using a map of the Castle that dictated what the layout really ought to be. By destroying bedrooms in Castle Amber in *Knight of Shadows* (*Sign of Chaos* was written but not published when the *Visual Guide* interviews took place), Zelazny could rearrange things or add rooms not mentioned earlier. "I realized after we finished it that having something like this exist is not such a good thing for me," he said, flipping through a copy of the *Visual Guide.* "Once I described all this, it would constrain me to this outline." A grin spread across his face. "So, in the new book, there's massive destruction of the castle. They're rebuilding large parts of it and there's construction in the background the whole time."[77] "That way, if somebody reads something that comes out after the *Visual Guide to Castle Amber* and says, 'wait a minute, there's no corridor there,' I say, 'Of course not—this is *after* the disaster between the Logrus and the Pattern. The place is rebuilt—it's no longer the same as this map you're looking at.' "[27]

From Ostracods and Tapeworms to Asteroids and Craters

In 1988 Zelazny was delighted to receive a letter from Koen Martens, a PhD student and fan, telling Zelazny that he had named a crustacean after him (class, *Ostracoda*; order, *Podocopida*; family *Cyprididae*; full name *Scerlocypris zelaznyi*). Zelazny announced his namesake in the introduction to the *Frost & Fire* collection. He omitted the detail that among seven ostracods Martens had named, the one with a large hemipenis honored Zelazny, while the least endowed bore the name of Martens's supervisor.[45,78,79]

Attempting to brag, Zelazny discovered that Jack C. Haldeman II had outdone him; a tapeworm bore his name—*Hymenapolis haldemanii*. Nor, he realized, did it quite compare with Isaac Asimov's and Arthur C. Clarke's having asteroids named after them in 1981. In 2008 the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Mars Rover project named a crater on Mars after him, close to those they had named for Arthur C. Clarke and Jack Williamson. None of the names on Mars are official.[80] According to the *Gazetteer of Planetary Nomenclature,* large craters (> 60 kilometer diameter) on Mars can bear the names of writers who have contributed to Martian lore, as Zelazny did with "A Rose for Ecclesiastes."[81] Fittingly, the full text of "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" was one of the pieces of "Martian literature" included on a silica glass mini-DVD entitled *Visions of Mars: First Library on Mars,* attached to the *Phoenix* Mars lander, which touched down on Mars on May 25, 2008. Other stories included Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles,* an excerpt of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Princess of Mars*, Arthur C. Clarke's *The Sands of Mars*, Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," Kim Stanley Robinson's novella "Green Mars," and an excerpt from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds.*[82]

Distinctions:

Locus Poll fantasy novel #3: *Sign of Chaos*
Locus Poll #9 all-time best author

Books Published:

Roger Zelazny's Visual Guide to Castle Amber
Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway: Pitfall by Thomas Wylde
Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway: The Web by Thomas Wylde

1989

Additional Martial Arts

In 1989 Zelazny broadened his martial arts repertoire, studying *tae kwon do* and *hapkido* with Michael Robinson for seven months. He reached yellow belt but suffered a heel injury and didn't continue. Instead, he went on to learn *hsing-I* and *pa-kua* under Rusty Hamilton.

Immortal Protagonists and their Author

Zelazny drew criticism for his immortal protagonists. He addressed this issue in a French fanzine. "I am fascinated by persons having a long life. A person who has lived several centuries has had more time to learn. He will not be inevitably wiser, but he will be better informed and will have a broader variety of information at his disposal than a younger person. Perhaps I like to work with such characters because I am interested in many different things, I like to play with literature, and because I need to justify logically that a character would have such information. I like my characters to be capable of making allusions to writers and poets. A character who is not immortal would be too old to launch into the kind of activities in which my characters usually find themselves, because my stories tend to be somewhat violent."[83] His studies in mythology augmented his interest in the topic.

He also cited George Sylvester Viereck and Paul Eldridge's trilogy about immortals, *My First Two Thousand Years*. The volumes deal with the Wandering Jew, Salome, and a proto-man, Kotikokura. "When I was growing up, I read the *2000-Year Trilogy* (each volume told from a different viewpoint) many times, & was doubtless influenced thereby in my own writing."[49]

Did immortality interest him personally? "Well, it's interesting to speculate on the effects of extended lifespan on the individual and future society. And yes, it is something in which I'm interested that happened to combine very nicely with my ideas of design for my books."[7] With immortality in so many of his novels, suspended animation in *Isle of the Dead*, and preprogrammed reincarnation in *Lord of Light*, had Zelazny concluded what his afterlife would be like? "To tell the truth, I'd rather just remain here. [*Laughter*]"[7]

Jane Lindskold and *Knight of Shadows*

Zelazny first met Jane Lindskold in 1989 at Lunacon in Tarrytown, New York, where he was Guest of Honor. They had become good friends over the previous six months through correspondence. Lindskold sent him a fan letter, and he replied with a post card. She went to Lunacon "with friends to what I thought would be something like an academic conference and walked into chaos. I almost didn't introduce myself to Roger, but did. It was one of those weird moments. We both instantaneously realized we were friends. Then the letters got longer and longer."[84,85] Lindskold was completing her PhD in English Literature at Fordham University in New York and was planning to be a writer. Then, between 1990 and 1992, she worked as an assistant professor of English at Lynchburg College in Virginia and interviewed Zelazny extensively (in person and via correspondence) for her 1993 biography and critical work, *Roger Zelazny*. She also initiated her writing career, and Zelazny supported her efforts. "Roger and I met through letters, starting with brief, formal notes which evolved into long, rambling novellas that required several stamps and stressed the carrying capacity of an envelope. Roger's daily entries would often begin with a weather report and I fell into a similar habit so that, despite distance, we had a strong sense of proximity. We discussed everything—religion, politics, music, art, family, friends, books, and writing."[84] Zelazny and Lindskold were both married (she to David Davies), but their friendship became romance, and they moved in together in mid-1994.

During that Lunacon, a fire alarm sounded on the night of March 10. Zelazny was attending a party hosted by his agent, Kirby McCauley; attendees included Lindskold, Robert Sheckley, Jim Baen, Bill Fawcett, Todd Hamilton, and others. The only existing copy of *Knight of Shadows* lay in Zelazny's hotel room, and at McCauley's urging he rushed back inside to rescue it. Afterwards, standing outside the hotel, he chatted with Robert Sheckley, and "we discussed a novel we'll probably do together"—it became *Bring Me the Head of Prince Charming*. The emergency was a false alarm; Zelazny's daring rescue was not so daring after all.[86]

Frost & Fire

The fifth short story collection *Frost & Fire* was the last that Zelazny assembled himself. Once again, he wrote autobiographical introductions for each piece. The collection included the Hugo Award-winning "24 View of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" and "Permafrost."

Amber Popularity and Future Novels

Zelazny speculated that the Amber series' success was due to its interrelated characters. "I intentionally set up a large family to work in every possible form of sibling rivalry and friendship one could visualize. So, I figured that no matter what sort of family a person grew up in, there would be some sort of identification. There's everything from incest to intra-family murders."[12] He planned another Amber series—after the Merlin set—after he'd had a vacation from it. Projections included narrations from other family members' viewpoints.

He told an interviewer that he was eager to write non-Amber novels, and he'd been kicking ideas around for several years. "I think I might like to try a large novel, on the order of *Lord of Light* or longer. I do have an idea which will probably run to that extent. I would rather write one big solid book than a trilogy." He said, "It will deal with the nature of time in a more bizarre and complex way than *Roadmarks*." He admitted that he might not write the novel, "I tend not to make long-term plans because I discovered that I may become fascinated by certain ideas, and they have a sort of half-life and run out after three years. If I have a really hot idea for something right now, I better write it before 1991 or another idea may well come along and supplant it."[12] He was right; he never did write that one. After completing the second Amber set, a contract to write a trilogy with Robert Sheckley and writing *A Night in the Lonesome October*, the *Donnerjack* trilogy, and *Lord Demon* sidetracked him.

Colterglass / Wilderness

Roving editor for Lotus Press, Gerald Hausman arranged for Zelazny to audiotape *Eye of Cat*. He also reminded Zelazny about the tales of John Colter and Hugh Glass. "It was at the end of the session—he recorded the entire novel nonstop in one afternoon with no second takes!—that I told him about Hugh Glass being eviscerated by a grizzly bear and crawling on his belly to avenge himself against Jamie Bridger who had helped to bury Glass (still alive). Roger saw, as I did, that the combination of two mountain men seeking to survive under the worst imaginable conditions would make a great yarn. It was at the recording session that he said, officially, that he'd do it with me."[73]

They agreed upon the working title of *Colterglass*, but the editor later changed it to *Wilderness*.

The Mask of Loki

Zelazny wrote *The Mask of Loki* with Thomas T. Thomas, who later collaborated with Frederik Pohl on a sequel to *Man Plus*. Zelazny had briefly chatted with Thomas at Balticon in April 1987, but Jim Baen, who thought they would work well together, set up and encouraged the collaboration. Baen believed such collaborations helped inexperienced authors advance their skills by working with more established ones. Unlike Zelazny's previous, equally portioned collaborations, this arrangement was for Thomas to do most of the writing. Baen originally wanted two novels in the *Wizard World* universe, but Thomas preferred to write hard science fiction. "I quickly let Jim know I'm not really into fantasy and, not being a believer in magic, not very good at it. Roger had some earlier notes for a novel about the Knights Templar and a jazz pianist that he had shown Jim, and Baen shared them with me and asked if I could complete the outline and write the book. The bent here was more mystical than magical, and I agreed to try."[87]

Zelazny entitled his outline *The Ahriman Factor*. It delineated many concepts for the novel and recommended resources for research on the Templars, Watchers, and the twelfth century. *The Ahriman Factor* was one of three film outlines that Zelazny wrote for 20th Century Fox in 1981; it appears in this volume. Thomas used Zelazny's outline, giving it the working title, *The Mask of Ahriman*. Zelazny suggested edits to Thomas's first draft, including some epigraphs for chapter headings, but he did not substantially revise the manuscript. The book saw print as *The Mask of Loki*.

Generally disregarded by readers of his work, *The Mask of Loki* reads more like a Zelazny novel than most of his previous collaborations.

Distinction:

Interzone #20 all-time best author

Books Published:

Knight of Shadows
Frost & Fire
Wizard World

1990

The Black Throne

Good friends, Zelazny and Fred Saberhagen had enjoyed working together on *Coils*. It seemed natural to undertake a second project. *Coils* had begun with Zelazny's outline (included in this volume), Saberhagen transformed it into a more detailed outline, and Zelazny used it to write the first and only draft of the manuscript. But *The Black Throne* originated with Saberhagen. "Fred is a terrific fan of Edgar Allan Poe; every January he gives a birthday party for Poe. So after a while he said 'Let's do a book about Poe' and I said 'Sure why not?' So I went off and read that of Poe I hadn't read previously."[88] Indeed, Zelazny then read *all* of Poe's works plus critical pieces and biographies. He felt he needed to assimilate that information before writing.

The project commenced. Saberhagen wrote a short outline, and the two discussed it in detail. Saberhagen then wrote a chapter-by-chapter outline. Zelazny found the writing fast and easy. He took Saberhagen's chapter outlines and "sat them up in front of me and ran them through the typewriter,"[89] as he had done with *Coils*. Zelazny was the principal writer for both books, using Saberhagen's outlines to create the final draft.

The Black Throne did not do as well as *Coils*. Poe enthusiasts enjoyed it but admitted that the pleasure came from trying to identify the allusions to Poe's work. Saberhagen later acknowledged that the collaboration on the novels was too easy, perhaps to the detriment of both. "I had never tried book-length collaboration before, and I probably never will again—I've been spoiled. It [*Coils*] was for each of us the easiest book that we had ever finished...maybe too easy, now that I look back on the experience. It is quite possible that both *Coils* and our second joint production, *The Black Throne*, would have been better books, and would have sold more copies, had we struggled more with the stories, and with each other, during their production."[90]

Prince of Chaos

Zelazny began the tenth and final Amber novel after returning from Norwescon at the end of March 1990.[91] Upon finishing, he said, "I still have things to say, but the final book of the series, *Prince of Chaos*, sort of brings things to a point I hope will be satisfying to the reader. Long enough to permit me to go off and write other things, because you get tired of anything if you do too much of it and I've lots of other writing projects I want to get into so I'm going to stop here. I could see coming back to it some time, not in the near future but further along, and doing a few more books to tie up various loose ends."[19] He dedicated the book "To Jane Lindskold—Gramercy, lady, for your help. This one was yours from the start."

Many enthusiasts concluded that the first (Corwin) series was better written and more entertaining than the second, a thought commonly repeated now in blogs and on-line discussions about Amber. Although the Merlin stories offered much to satisfy Amber fans, it suffered from the absence of an outline more than the first series had. To some readers and critics the Merlin novels seem more like a haphazard series of episodes, lacking a coherent story.

Philip José Farmer and *Riverworld*

Zelazny enjoyed Philip José Farmer's writing and wrote introductions to several of his novels. Farmer asked Zelazny to complete his *Riverworld* series in the event of his death, a task Zelazny did not have to undertake. "He wanted me to finish *Riverworld*, if something happened to him. At the time, he'd...I'd forgotten about that...he was feeling...anyway, he got to thinking what might happen if he didn't get the series finished, and he wrote to me to ask me if I would consider completing the series in the event of his death, if he were to make arrangements with his Estate to see that I was reimbursed for it, and if he were to leave an outline, say in a safe-deposit box somewhere. I agreed to this, and then I started getting nervous, because he didn't write it for a long while. Fortunately, I didn't have to."[91]

Colterglass / Wilderness

In 1990 Zelazny finally began to work on *Colterglass*. For background he read John G. Neihardt's poetic biography, *The Song of Hugh*

Glass, provided by Gerald Hausman. "Roger began reading Neihardt's *Song*, and phoned to say he liked it very much and thought it might work as a template. We were still talking about the book; I had a first chapter and lots of notes. Roger was still thinking, and talking, but he had shown me a start that looked like a second chapter to the saga."[92] That second chapter followed a long interval. Hausman recounted his surprise in an essay he wrote after Zelazny's death: "At the top of the page was the word 'Glass.' Amazed, I read on, discovering that it was chapter two of the novel I had proposed we would write together, a book about two men fighting their own personal demons in the American West: one turning hawk, the other turning bear..."[74]

However, Zelazny was still occupied with several other projects. Hausman continued to research the Colter story, reading accounts of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the 1952 biography *John Colter* by Burton Harris.

Live Readings and Audiobooks

Zelazny enjoyed reading his work at conventions and getting instant feedback. He read excerpts of *Nine Princes in Amber* to audiences as early as 1967, several years before the novel appeared. He finished "Permafrost" sooner than planned because he wanted to have something new to read at a gathering in Taos (see afterword to that story). He explained that "the writer can be like an old-fashioned storyteller, getting an immediate response from the other people around the campfire,"[89] and "over the years I have done many readings, normally live, sometimes on radio, and I enjoy reading very much."[12] Very few live (fan-produced) recordings of his readings exist, but his reading of the humorous "LOKI 7281" as Guest of Honor at the Fourth Street Fantasy Convention in 1986 (available from Shockwave Radio and on YouTube) provides an excellent example of his appeal.

He recorded several audio books, reading his work and Karl Wagner's, John Jakes's, and Robert Bloch's. His works included *Eye of Cat, A Night in the Lonesome October,* and nine of the Amber novels. He recorded the first nine Amber novels, unabridged, for Sunset Productions in Santa Fe. The tapes were then edited to about half the original length with added sound effects and music. Sunset issued these versions on audiocassette with cover art by Tim White. Bruce Watson recorded the final book, *Prince of Chaos,* after Zelazny died. Subsequent demand convinced Sunset to release the audio books in unabridged format, minus music and sound effects. Sunset brought out the first six unabridged audio books (through *Trumps of Doom*), and the eighth, *Sign of Chaos,* came from Sunset under an alternate brand, Audio USA. Neither the unabridged seventh (*Blood of Amber*) nor ninth books (*Knight of Shadows*) ever appeared. Bruce Watson read the last part of the unabridged *The Hand of Oberon* because the company had either lost or damaged the master tapes of Zelazny reading that portion. Americana Publishing Inc. bought Sunset in 2002 and reissued the 10 abridged recordings on both audiocassette and CD.

In 2004, Americana informed this biographer that they had unabridged master tapes of the first seven books, including the unreleased *Blood of Amber*, but they could not locate unabridged versions of *Sign of Chaos* and *Knight of Shadows*.[93] Americana then sent a cursory email survey to a Zelazny newsgroup and to a few others who had asked them about the unabridged recordings, inquiring if they wanted them and what price they might pay for them. Americana concluded from this limited survey not to re-release them. Thus, the uncut *Blood of Amber* and *Knight of Shadows* were not released.[94] But between 2009 and 2012, a new company, Speaking Volumes, released Zelazny's unabridged readings of the first nine novels on CD and mp3. Portions of *Blood of Amber* were recorded by another reader due to inadvertent erasure of the master tapes; Zelazny's reading of *The Hand of Oberon* was intact.

Most of Zelazny's novels and short story collections exist as unabridged audio recordings made specifically for the blind or visually impaired. Many have appeared on internet file-sharing websites. Professional recordings of all ten Amber novels, *This Immortal*, and *Lord of Light*, have been released by Audible.

Absent Parent(s)

Zelazny acknowledged that certain recurring motifs in his fiction stemmed in part from his own experiences: the motor vehicle as an instrument of death, immortality, suicide, and a fascination with god-like beings. Another recurring theme is the absent father-figure. Corwin's father Oberon was missing and presumed dead through most of the first Amber series, and Merlin searched for Corwin in the second. Other examples include the orphans Fred Cassidy in *Doorways in the Sand*, Pol Detson in *Changeling* and *Madwand*, Jarry Dark in "The Keys to December," David Wayne in "Godson," and Mike Murray in *Alien Speedway*. Zelazny also wrote about the influence of

Michael Gallinger's dead father in "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," a younger Sandow wanting proof of his absent father's love in "Dismal Light," a kidnapped father in *A Dark Traveling*, and Randy Dorakeen's search for the father he'd never known in *Roadmarks*.

Zelazny's father, Joseph, died unexpectedly in 1962 and never knew his son's successes as a writer. Did this traumatic event cause Zelazny's possibly unconscious use of the absent father motif? It doesn't appear that Zelazny ever addressed this issue in interviews or correspondence.

Although several of his characters were orphans, Zelazny certainly wasn't. His mother outlived him and died on October 3, 1996.[35]

A Major but Inadvertent Parental Influence

A paradox of parenting is that forbidding something to a child may encourage the child to actively seek it out. Zelazny's parents inadvertently stoked his life-long interest and career. "My parents didn't particularly like me to read fairy tales or books of that sort. They thought it would encourage me to be too imaginative. So when I got to reading myself, and I found literature of this sort on the shelves of the school library, I took to it quite readily, because I was not familiar with that sort of thing and it fascinated me. And at the time, I didn't know what science fiction was, but I did like fantastic literature, so I began reading all the books on mythology and that sort of thing... and [when] I came across science fiction...it was love at first sight."[7]

More Thoughts on Creative Writing

"The short story is a very special form. For one thing, there is an economy to the medium which is not present in novels. In a novel you can be a bit sloppy. Just for the fun of it, you can write throwaway scenes which do not really advance the action, claiming that you're 'fleshing out the character' or 'adding texture' or, in general, 'contributing to unity.' This is partly because a novel need not possess a single vision, need not cut a clean arc from here to there and then stop when it's made a point. A short story has something in common with a ballad, as opposed to a symphony, a single-panel cartoon as distinct from a full-length feature film. Everything has to be in place. There is no room for false starts, wasted motion, afterthoughts. And it's awfully hard to do this and do this well. It is difficult to say several things with a single statement, as in some places you really must in an effective short piece. And it's hard to trim away all of the fat and yet avoid making the thing seem mechanical. Idea and execution must fit each other perfectly."[95]

"Like anything, writing becomes easier with practice. If I approach anything resembling something I had written in the past, it's easier to write it now than it would have been *de novo*. On the other hand, when you have dispensed with the mechanical problems, new problems arise."[89] He needed to gratify readers who wanted the old Zelazny but also something new. "It's not so much a matter of *a* novel or *a* story as it is a body of themes and attractive ideas that I've been playing with most of my adult life—and probably before that. I'm not finished with them by any means. I see maybe ten, twenty years down the line some book that will take [these themes] and carry them to a point a lot further. But what it is, I can't imagine. A potentiality lurking on the horizon. If I could articulate it, I'd write it now."[89] Most of those ideas, unfortunately, remain unwritten.

Regarding his place in science fiction history, he wrote, "I came in right at the tail-end of the pulp period, & I was touched by it. I had great respect for some of the so-called human writing machines who could turn out reams of copy at the drop of a check. Though with me it may be part of a literary schizophrenia. On the one hand, I have a formal training in literature which most of the old pulp writers lacked. On the other hand, I learned the lessons of rapid composition, & I sometimes enjoy thinking of myself as a 'hack'—well, a 'professional'—able to write to order in a hurry when the need arises. I've never thought of this as a Bad Thing, though. And there is that element in my makeup. But the craft & the art of it have always appealed to me a lot more, & I do know the difference between an 'entertainment' & something more serious."[48]

Distinctions:

Locus Poll collection #7: *Frost & Fire*
Western Reserve Alumni Association Creative Achievement Award

Books Published:

The Black Throne
The Mask of Loki

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A note about the format of references:

JOURNALS/MAGAZINES/FANZINES

Author. Title of article. *Journal Name.* Year; Volume (Issue Number [#Whole Number and/or Month]): pages.

BOOK SECTIONS

Author. Title of article. In: Editor. *Book Title.* City, State: Publisher, Year: pages.

WHOLE BOOKS

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CORRESPONDENCE

Author. Letter/Email to recipient, date.

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CURIOSITIES

HEAD COUNT

Written in the 1980s; previously unpublished.

Opening scene: Viet Nam. Soldiers asking one of their number to show it to them again. The guy unhooks a small bag from his ammo belt and opens it, withdrawing a partly mummified right hand. Someone suggests he get rid of the thing, that it's sick carrying around some VC's hand he'd cut off. The reply, "How many American boys you think that hand's pulled the trigger on?"

Scene: Same guy, bearded now, older, scruffily dressed, lurching across a blustery Times Square, carrying a bottle in a brown paper bag. Seats himself on a bench. Takes a drink, realizes it's the last, places it on the ground beneath the bench. Starts asking passersby, "Got a buck for something to eat?"

Finally, a big man slows. When he's braced for a buck, he says, "How'd you like to make a twenty?"

"What's the catch?"

"I need someone to help me move something. It's slightly illegal."

"That'll cost you fifty."

"Okay."

"In advance."

The guy pays him.

"Come on. My car's not far off."

The vet follows him.

In car: "Where we headed?"

"Upstate."

"How far?"

"Not very." Fade.

Later, country road, trees passing:

"Just how the hell far is not very?"

Driver looks around, pulls over. "Okay. We get out here."

They do. Driver pulls a gun.

"Hands behind your back."

He handcuffs him and forces him into the trunk. Drives on.

Evening: The car enters a secluded estate. Twelve other people—men and women, mostly young—are present. The vet is removed from the trunk and taken into a chapel where he is stripped and tied to an altar. Inverted crucifix. Pentagram on floor. Circle. The 13 people don robes and commence a Satanic-seeming ritual, culminating in each one's coming forward and stabbing him, catching his blood in a small chalice and drinking some. Closeups of each face, mouth, drinking. Afterwards, the big man who had found him carries his body out to a river and tosses it in. Fade.

He is not dead, however, and the coldness of the river while inducing hypothermia also saves his life by slowing his bodily functions, as he is spotted downriver shortly thereafter, fished out and taken to a hospital. Flat-line brain function, machine maintenance. He remains in a coma for several years.

One day he awakens. Asked if he remembers what happened, he says, "No." But he is seeing flashbacks to the faces of the people drinking his blood. Fade.

Later, clean-shaven, sober, neatly but casually dressed, wearing mirrorshades, camera at belt, he's sitting on the same bench where the big guy had found him, watching the passersby. Time passes. Spring to summer. Gray skies, bright ones, changing window displays in stores, peoples' clothing shifting from cool to warm-weather wear.

One day the big guy, older now, passes again. The vet follows the man. Finally, watching him day after day, he sees him meet with one of the others—whom he also begins following. There are others. He takes pictures, of house and apartment fronts, auto license tags. He follows others, in-city and elsewhere, against many landscapes and skylines. The people have changed—one's a priest now, a woman's a surgeon, the big guy proves to be a cop. Each time he sees one a flashback to that face, younger, occurs, drinking his blood.

Night. Parking garage or dark stretch of street. Man walking. One of Them. The vet emerges from between two cars or out of a doorway, wearing dark clothing (face blackened, also?) Draws from behind his belt a length of piano wire attached to two wooden handles. Slips behind his quarry, catches him about the neck with the wire, pulls, tightens, turns, jerks. Decapitation follows. He raises the head by the hair and places it within a plastic trash can liner he has with him. From a pocket he removes a piece of blue chalk and sketches a pentagram about the body. Fade.

Several more such incidents follow. The tabloids pick them up as Satanist ritual killings. In the meantime, the vet, having tracked most of them now, decides to go after the cop. His first mistake. The guy hears him an instant before he strikes and succeeds in fighting him off, getting a look at him in the process.

Flashback to the ritual. The cop recalls the face of that early victim he thought dead. He calls, and gets together with, the others. Tells them what he's discovered. It becomes apparent that they've all mellowed, that what they did years ago was on the order of a youthful indiscretion. They have, mainly, grown apart; they no longer get together for anything like that early ritual. Nothing had ever (apparently) really come of the rites they'd performed in those days. Most of them are reputable professional people now. They're suddenly scared that this guy isn't human, that he's a back-from-the-dead avenger. Or that perhaps the guy is possessed by the demon they'd invoked at the time of the ritual. The cop scoffs at this, says that the guy is tough, but that he did hurt him, did fight him off.

They aren't about to take this to the police, but try to handle it themselves. The cop trains the nine remaining people in stakeout techniques and has them all on pistol ranges and is teaching them the rudiments of unarmed combat. He has them taking turns then—half of them watching the other half at all times.

The vet spots one of the stakeouts, though, and takes out both his intended victim and the other. This time he leaves a clue, however—blood, skin and hair beneath a victim's fingernails, a bloody thumbprint on a windshield. The cop begins hanging around a friend in Homicide who's assigned to the cases, learning that the thumbprint leads to a military record. No current address for the guy, though.

The vet gets two more of them before another lead turns up. In the time before they connect him with the vanished coma case he was, he kills another, leaving five. They finally track him to a gallery where he works as a caretaker, having a small apartment in the rear. Pursuit and combat amid *objets d'arte* and mirrors. He takes them out one by one, except for the big cop. The cop, severely injured, finally kills him with a long piece of broken glass from one of the shattered cases, there in the vet's room, where he has all of the heads he's collected mounted on sticks at various levels.

Notes

This short tale may have been an outline for an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, but no script was made from it. The undated manuscript was found with other material from the late 1980s.

VC means Viet Cong, a Vietnamese supporting the National Liberation Front of the former South Vietnam. **Braced** means confronted. ***Objets d'art*** are items of artistic merit—paintings, statues, etc.

CHANGELING

(FILM OUTLINE)

Written in the late 1970s; previously unpublished.
§ *Pol Detson / Wizard World*

Story to open at the point where most heroic fantasies conclude—a military and sorcerous confrontation between forces of light and darkness. Scene to open with an assault upon a dark citadel during a storm, the heroes' military expedition guided by a good sorcerer employed in staving off magical attacks by the evil sorcerer who is Lord of the Citadel. Feathered serpents, demons, dragons, harpies, a Gorgon turning troops to stone, and a gang of nasty looking guys defend the citadel. Standard-model human beings, centaur archers, and Homeric-style heroes participate in the assault. The evil sorcerer is not unattractive, with a single strand of black through otherwise white hair. He bears a dragon-shaped birthmark on the inside of his right wrist. His Lady is a pale, striking woman, who is fleeing to a tower carrying a small bundle while the fighting proceeds.

The citadel's defenses are breached, the attackers pour in, the demons are banished, the various monsters are driven to caverns beneath the castle by the white sorcerer where they are cast into a sleep and the caverns sealed after them. The evil sorcerer is slain and his scepter of power broken into three pieces by the good sorcerer [it cannot be destroyed, but he will sequester the pieces in inaccessible places]. The tower where the Lady has fled is struck by lightning or a catapult bolt. She falls to her death, only having time to save her bundle by tossing it back behind her.

All the sounds of fighting cease; the storm ends abruptly. There is a silence in the hall where the citadel's lord lies dead. Suddenly, the sound of a baby's crying is heard. Heads turn. Credits begin to roll. Outside, a dirge for the dead begins.

A search ensues. The bundle, located in the ruined tower, proves to be a baby. Possible speculation here as to whether it was to be sacrificed in a nefarious rite for the villain's victory. However, it is discovered to bear the dragon birthmark on its wrist, and they realize it is the sorcerer's son. Some are for killing the baby immediately, as the mark assures that he will come into his father's powers one day, and of course he will not be kindly disposed toward the slayers of his parents. But there is also a natural squeamishness at killing an innocent child. They turn to the good sorcerer for advice.

The sorcerer speaks, fading into a voiceover for a sequence of scenes dramatizing his narration. He tells how their land, Atlantis, had long ago existed as a high-technology civilization with colonies all over the world [Egypt, Greece, Central America] but had brought about its own fiery collapse and ruin, its high seats of culture to this day places of raging volcanoes, geysers, boiling mud pools. The present survivors [including satyrs, centaurs, feathered serpents, dragons] are the descendants of those existing at that time in more sylvan environs—a condition they have since attempted to preserve, shunning the mutant-haunted ruins of technological centers, anathematizing those who would restore mechanical devices.

Now, as the universe rolls on its way, there is a law, the sorcerer explains, governing the outcome of great events. Every major either-or turning point in history generates both alternatives. While their high-tech civilization collapsed ages before, leaving them only myths of the great age of mechanism, there came to exist a parallel world in which Atlantis was actually destroyed *in toto*—a world which developed along opposite lines from their own, where technology now reigns supreme and where the magical, mystical, pastoral aspects of their own world are now legend.

There is a means by which he can cross the barrier between the worlds, the sorcerer says. So, rather than slaughter an innocent child, he proposes taking the baby across to that other world, where—even if his powers develop there—his abnormality would be rationalized away, laughed at, or at best pigeonholed as paranormal phenomena. There in a symmetry to the universe, however, which requires that an exchange of equivalent living mass must occur. Therefore, there must be a changeling: if he takes this baby over, he must bring another baby back.

A childless couple readily agrees to raise the changeling as their own, and the sorcerer sets forth upon the strange, star-dotted, glittering road between the worlds, passing many enticing branches which could perhaps lead to other worlds of probability.

Cut to a large, complex, modernistic university environment and the home of a Professor of Engineering and his wife, baby in bedroom, waiting for the babysitter to arrive so that they can go out for the evening. Father in office, complete with computer terminal, cathode ray tube drawing board with light pen, and perhaps a T-square and triangle somewhere in sight, wiring diagram hanging on walls, etc.

The sorcerer effects an entry into the child's bedroom, switches the babies, and takes the engineer's son with him back to the Atlantean continuum, where he delivers him to his foster parents.

There follows a series of scenes cutting back and forth between the two worlds, showing the changelings' growth and development. The sorcerer's son, temperamentally unsuited for the mechanized urban environment (fear of rushing vehicles, discomfort in attending to his teaching console), finds solace on an artistic level, playing a musical instrument in the most secluded spots he can find—the tops of buildings, dingy parks with ill-kept artificial plants and mechanical birds. [Good place for a melancholy song.] His powers begin to emerge at some instance of discipline for neglect of his studies, as a kind of poltergeist effect—machines going haywire, household items shattering or flying about, intercut with shots of his downcast face.

Meanwhile, the engineer's son undergoes an emergence of mechanical aptitudes, making simple tools, building new ones. [A musical theme for this could be introduced here.] He tries later to introduce something slightly ambitious—perhaps a flotation-gauge device geared to mechanically operate floodgates in an irrigation system. He sets one up to demonstrate his idea and sees it destroyed in anger rather than received with pleasure by the villagers, after which he is warned concerning the evils of machinery, mocked by a satyr or two, and sent on his way. His only solace is a little neighbor girl who tries to comfort him. He runs off into the hills and strays into one of the "forbidden places" where ruined buildings and overgrown bits of machinery lie about. There, he stumbles into an underground shelter or cavern, packed with machinery. There, while pursuing his natural fascination with mechanism, he accidentally activates a computerized teaching device which answers his questions as to its own nature and functions quite willingly. He seizes the opportunity and sets it to teaching him science, projecting simple schematics onto its screen.

Another cut may show the sorcerer's son, now a young man with a white streak through his otherwise dark hair—the opposite of his father's—playing in some small club to other malcontents of his world, singing of some dream of strange lands where magic holds the day,

Another cut to the engineer's son, also grown now—redheaded, well-proportioned—shows him with a mechanical bird on his shoulder (occasionally making *dit-dit, dah-dah, doo*, computer-like sounds), a video receiver strapped to his wrist, permitting him to see through the bird's eyes as it maneuvers in response to his orders, spying on cavorting centaurs, on his girlfriend, etc. Experimenting with this arrangement, he is surprised by his foster parents, who plead with him to give up his attachment to gadgets before the other townfolk—who are already suspicious of him—set upon him for his wicked ways. A delegation of them is even at that moment on the way over to speak with him, they explain, and it would behoove him to break his machines and dispose of their remains quickly. He grows scornful and then angry. He refuses. His girlfriend then comes to speak with him on the same matter. He asks her to come away with him to the great fortress he has caused to be built in the mountains, where he claims to rule as lord of mutants and mechanical servants. Frightened, she declines.

He meets the townsfolk with bitter words, and a fight follows. Blades are finally drawn, and he sets the mechanical bird upon the people in his defense. It shifts shape, growing larger and meaner, and it fights well. But it is only a single bird, and there are quite a few people. He is wounded somewhere on the left side of the face by a head cut with a blade. People draw back as he falls and the bird hovers over him to protect him. He rises slowly, his left hand covering that half of his faces, blood running out between his fingers and down the back of his hand, and he pronounces a judgment upon the people, the village, the land—that he will return one day as a conqueror, with mutant and mechanical legions to do his bidding—that he will force upon them those things they have been too blind to recognize as being for their own good. Reaching across with his right hand—and not removing his left from his face—he fingers some studs on the device at his left wrist. The mechanical bird's wings unfold, section by section, into more massive vanes. It then leaps into the air, casting a menacing shadow over the crowd, takes hold of him by the shoulders and lifts him aloft, bearing him away while the girl weeps softly below.

Word of this occurrence is conveyed to the good sorcerer, now a very old, very ill man, no longer capable summoning the powers necessary to halt the menace the changeling has become. He summons up a vision of the dark sorcerer's son in the other world, playing music in the club, and realizes that they may have made a bad bargain on the exchange. The other boy seems decent enough…

So, with failing strength, he travels once more to the place between the worlds, and there he summons the youth with the dragon birthmark to him—his musical instrument still in his hand. He begins to tell him of his changeling stepbrother and of the situation which prevails in his natural homeland, but there his strength fails. He sends the youth, not yet fully informed, to the Atlantean continuum and crosses over himself into the other, to die there, leaving his own body mass in that place to provide the exchange material required by the law of symmetry. Dying amid the fake flowers of an artificial park, a fake butterfly landing on his hand, it is seen that he, too, bears the dragon birthmark on his wrist.

In the Atlantean continuum the sorcerer's son approaches the town he sees in the distance. On the way he hears a girl crying in a glade and enters to investigate. It is his unknown step-brother's friend, still distraught by events, and he seeks to comfort her. She is curious as to the nature of the strange instrument he bears, and he plays it for her. Its effect here, played by a sorcerer come into his own realm, is synesthetic as well as musical—magical, actually—modulating the light about him in a kind of strobe fashion, altering it, attracting denizens of the wood—animals, centaurs, satyrs, sphinx-like creatures, and perhaps a small, flying, feathered serpent—who begin to dance (casting him, possibly, as a kind of Orpheus).

The girl is heartened, also fascinated, and conducts him back to the town. On the way she tells him what has occurred with her friend and fills him in concerning recent events. She suggests that her parents might put him up for a time. He accepts, and at some gathering shortly thereafter he is asked to play before a group of townsfolk. At that time, a slipping back of his sleeve reveals his birthmark and the horrorstruck townfolk cry "Wizard!" and drive him forth, casting stones at him. His suppressed powers, stimulated in this magical land of his birth, emerge strongly then, and he shields himself and flees.

He takes refuge in a ruined building, at first not realizing it to be his father's citadel. Exploring the place, he finds caches of old books, manuscripts, magical instruments—and his father's journal. Essaying one of the spells, he discovers that they work for him. Recalling the good sorcerer's words in light of his discovery, he comes to realize that this was his original home, that the people who rejected him also include some of those who killed his parents. Suddenly very bitter, he strains his new-found powers to awaken a sleeping dragon or giant feathered serpent from one of the caverns he has discovered beneath the castle. Using it for a mount, he ranges above the countryside and the town day after day, frightening the inhabitants while contemplating what he might do. On one such occasion, he sees below him in a wood the girl, his only friend, set upon by several robots and/or mutants who seem intent upon her abduction. He and his mount descend and do battle with them, destroying them and the flying machine in which they attempt to flee. She then tells him more of the other changeling and of his threat and of the approximate location of his base of operations.

With the girl as his guide, he journeys to that place. His approach is observed from the spire of a modernistic building by the other changeling, whose left eye has been replaced (or partially repaired and covered) by an elaborate projecting lens which periodically changes color. Below this, a jagged scar descends his left cheek.

The sorcerer indicates that he wishes to talk and is permitted to land. The engineer is interested in the story of the other world and in the pictures of his natural parents which the other bears in a wallet he still carries, but the presence of his former girlfriend in the company of this man bothers him, and the two of them do not get on well. The sorcerer is also irritated, over the attempted kidnapping. Words are exchanged, then threats, and finally there is a fight. The engineer summons too many mechanical aides, however, and the sorcerer produces his old poltergeist effect, driving a great number of the machines haywire, and he and the girl flee on the dragon's back to the ruined citadel—pursued by mechanical birds and a few inadequate missiles.

The sorcerer has seen the engineer's kingdom, readying for war. It reminds him—with brief flashbacks, perhaps—too much of the place from which he has come. This, plus the presence of the girl, causes him to opt for the side of the people who drove him forth, and he determines to oppose the engineer. He is not strong enough to recall all of his father's dark forces, however—even arousing the single dragon or serpent had represented a great effort; he has the powers but not the training or the means to focus it—so he seeks through the old books after some magical device to assist him. He comes across a picture of the scepter which had been broken, and he recalls the good sorcerer's hurried words about—"the three places where the pieces lie" and realizes he must locate and reunite them. But one of the shapeshifting mechanical birds which has followed him, has—as bat, rat and bird—observed and listened as he read in the books and spoke with the girl, and it returns to its master with the knowledge that he will be seeking the pieces of his magical weapon in an Egyptian pyramid, a Cretan labyrinth, and a Mayan well.

He and the girl journey to each of these places, and at each they are attacked or ambushed, but they succeed in recovering two of the pieces and escaping. At the final one, the sorcerer recovers the last segment, but the girl is kidnapped by the servants of his enemy. He returns immediately to the citadel, from which the townsfolk see flashing lights as he repairs and wields the scepter, awakening the monsters, summoning the demons. All of them airborne, he leads his army across the night to his enemy's stronghold. A terrific battle ensues as the opposing forces virtually annihilate one another. The engineer then produces his hostage and threatens to kill her unless the sorcerer surrenders. The land is already shattering, with geysers, volcanoes and fiery rivers springing forth—and the sorcerer realizes in a sudden flash of insight [flashback to white sorcerer's description of the destruction of Atlantis] that it must have been an encounter between science and magic which destroyed the high culture of the land ages before, splitting the continuum into its parallel parts. He tries to explain this, but to no avail. The engineer is already more than half-mad. He calls upon him once again to surrender, and the sorcerer looks about him and laughs, "Surrender what?" he calls back. "Both of our armies are finished. Look for yourself." He is correct. Their forces were almost exactly balanced and have just about succeeded in destroying one another—a final dragon or feathered serpent and a final automatic tank seem about all that remains. The engineer looks over the battlefield and realizes this; but he knows, too, that if he survives, he can build again one day, and if the other survives he can acquire more supernatural assistance one day. But he holds the girl at the parapet's edge, overlooking a nascent volcano which periodically causes the building to shudder. Eye lens flashing more rapidly now, he bids the other cast his magic scepter into the flaming hole, or he'll throw the girl in. The sorcerer complies.

The engineer pushes the girl aside then, willing to fight the other changeling himself with a final device—a jumble-box, he calls it, the prototype of what was to have been his greatest weapon—a machine which assails the sorcerer with wave after wave of sensory distortions until finally it will burn out his brain synapses. Despite the games his senses are playing with reality, though, the sorcerer realizes at some level that his motor reflexes are intact. He gropes after his musical instrument and begins to play. Slowly, the machine-induced distortions retreat, but normal reality is not exactly restored. There is a recurrence of the effect he had produced in the glade upon his arrival, only now it is an angry thing—lots of reds mingling with the flashes of fire from below where the eruptions continue to shake the tower. The beat becomes a palpable thing as the distortions of the music and the jumble-box interplay, driving his enemy backward, until finally the engineer slips, just as the tower tilts and goes over the edge into the inferno below.

The sorcerer stops playing. The girl rushes to him. She indicates a flying machine the engineer had kept nearby for his own escape. It is similar in appearance to those the sorcerer had piloted on the other Earth. [Or we could have it be his own faithful steed, which had been circling and circling and has just now come down.] They rush to it and lift off as the tower topples.

On the field, the final serpent destroys the final tank and collapses across it.

A Word from Zelazny

Zelazny wrote this outline in the late 1970s for an animated film by Nelvana Films in Toronto. "They flew me up and asked me if I'd be interested in working for them. So they hired me to do an outline of a story, and I did outline *Changeling.* They said they liked the story, but it wasn't particularly suited to animation. They could just as easily do it with live actors and special effects. So I got me a different outline. I did them one that they liked better [possibly *Shadowland,* or another film treatment involving Native American mythology]. They bought that one. Then the project got shelved. I got my money, but they never made the film. Later, when the editor of Ace books asked for a book, I had the outline of *Changeling* sitting right there, so I wrote the story."[1]

Notes

Zelazny's handwritten note on the manuscript indicates that he temporarily abandoned the outline and later used it for *Changeling,* written for Jim Baen. Zelazny planned a trilogy: *Changeling, Madwand,* and *Deathmask.* Although he always intended to write that third book—"One of these days I'll get *Deathmask* written…"[2]—he died before doing so.

Harpies are ugly, violent creatures with a woman's head and body and a bird's wings and claws. **Gorgon** refers to three sisters (Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa) who have snakes for hair; their gaze turns onlookers to stone. **Homeric** is in the style of ancient Greek warriors (as in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*); **satyrs** are lustful, drunken woodland gods who resemble men with horses' ears and tails or goats' legs and horns. **Sylvan** means of the forest; **anathematizing** means excommunicating. **Synesthetic** is the provoking of a sense impression by stimulating another sense or part of the body (*e.g.*, seeing color in response to music). **Sphinxes** have wings, a woman's head, and a lion's body. The poet **Orpheus** could entrance wild beasts with the beauty of his music. A **poltergeist** is a ghost that makes noise and other disturbances.

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[1] *Media Sight* Vol 3 No 1 Summer 1984.

[2] Letter from Roger Zelazny to Linda Vissers dated 21 April, 1992.

COILS
(OUTLINE)

Written in the 1980s; previously unpublished.

I. Time: mid-1990s

Donald BelPatri has an awful lot of acquaintances and no really close friends. His current girlfriend, Cora Miles, a schoolteacher on summer vacation, is puzzled both by his mysterious source of income ($5,000 credited to his account every month) and by his lack of curiosity as to its source. He has been living the carefree life of a monied beach bum in Florida for several years. When she finally persuades him to inquire at his bank, they are unable to trace the payments to their source, as the EFTs (Electronic Funds Transfers) are, in his case, the equivalent of bank checks. She causes him to examine his past life and discover whether these might be from a trust fund or repeat pension payments or whatever. He describes his last place of residence—a small town in Northern Michigan—quite vividly. She talks him into visiting the place with her, and the city bears no resemblance to the one he has described.

He is shaken by this. When they return to Florida, he decides to visit a psychiatrist. The doctor employs hypnosis and finds him a very docile subject, leading him to believe that the technique had been employed on him in the past. He discovers that someone has indeed been into Donald's mind before him, and it appears that the Michigan memories are false constructs, painstakingly created to cover over something else and accompanied by powerful suggestions to the effect that he not question his status quo or be at all curious as to his means of support; also, a natural tendency to shy away from close relationships has been reinforced. Fascinated, the doctor probes deeply and begins to spot pieces of a bizarre situation involving a major oil company now reaping huge benefits from the exploitation of applications of solar energy, via a long string of patents acquired quickly several years earlier. Don was somehow instrumental in the company's achieving this favorable position in the new energy area, though the precise nature of his contribution is not readily apparent. The doctor orders him to remember this upon wakening and to continue to recall what really occurred as time goes on. Don returns home and tells Cora everything he has remembered. She begins to see the implications and grows frightened. This fear increases when his appointment for the following day is canceled because the doctor is found dead of an apparent heart attack. They both realize that someone must be following him. Did his inquiries at the bank and the trip to Michigan trigger a sudden surveillance and a murder? Or has he been under constant surveillance? Is he now in any sort of personal danger? He goes drinking with buddies he had not been seeing since he had met Cora, gets plastered and spends the night at one of their places. He awakens with more memories of his hidden past. He also returns home to discover that Cora has departed, leaving an unsigned, typed note to the effect that she does not want to become involved in something she sees developing into a dangerous situation. He is not certain that the note is authentic, partly because she is an English teacher and it bears some awkward grammatical constructions, partly because it is typed and bears no signature, and mostly because he does not feel that the action is in character with the girl he has known. His own character seems to have altered, however, with the partial recovery of his memories. He is more resolute. He is angry for the first time in years. A personality change is coming over him. He is more analytical, seems more intelligent now. He drives to his bank, parks in its lot, but does not get out of his vehicle. He stretches, relaxes, closes his eyes. The Coil Effect begins…

II

The second section will be structured to tell his life story in significant bits and pieces of flashback, interspersed alternately with pieces of current action. Here is the biographical part: He was the only child—and duly sensitive, introspective, etc—of a couple who owned a computer service, renting time and providing programming assistance to a great variety of customers in the El Paso area where he grew up. He developed an affinity with the machines at an early age, personifying and talking with them and later playing computer games whenever a little free time was available [we could occasionally show him in the midst of one of these if something to match a current peril occurs]. Later, he entered college, but he never completed his studies, as he and his parents were involved in an accident during vacation, an accident which proved fatal to his parents and left him in a hospital bed—blind, deaf and paralyzed. [Hence, the head scars that Cora had noted.] Unable to communicate with the outside world, he developed a completely unprecedented psi-power, a specialized form of telepathy, no good with humans, but permitting him to follow the functioning of the hospital's computer, near which his room is located. He can read its contents and decipher its programming—and via its connections with other machines can later move his mind along an entire network of computers. This keeps him sane, or at least rational, within the prison of his disabilities. During the course of this, he once or twice encounters an anomaly he cannot fathom. More on this part later. Suddenly one day—well over a year after the accident—he begins to recover. Vision and hearing, sensitivity, and finally mobility return to him. There is an income settlement and a small inheritance waiting for him. He decides to return to school, enrolling in a number of courses in computer science. Again, he does not complete his course of studies, as a recruiter for a large oil company shows up on campus, interviewing seniors for employment. He is not a senior, but he is approached by the recruiter anyway—a woman, ________ who says that he was highly recommended by his Computer Science Professor. Would he consider accepting a job at this point? The company will pay for him to finish his schooling on a piecemeal basis if he is interested. He is interested. The woman, unknown to him at this time, is one of the rare, unpublicized psionics in the world—a human-to-human telepath—which is why she holds the position she does, seeking out new paranormal talents on campus for company employment. She has seen his unusual ability in her scanning of the undergraduates. His job commences normally enough, and he becomes infatuated with his recruiter (possibly at her telepathic suggestion?). He had never spoken with anyone concerning his ability, of the "Coil Effect" as he calls it—because of the vertiginous sensation he experiences whenever he is entering into mental computer communication—but he does tell her about it during the affair. He learns then of her special talent and of the company's search for more paranormals. He also learns that there are two others they've found—a somewhat older man who is a psychokinetic, ________, and a fat, heavy drinking, generally perspiring, slightly depressed Southerner, who has been a revisionist preacher and a faith healer until he realized that his talent was psionics rather than a mark of divine favor, when in a fit of anger he had one day called upon its reverse in asking that someone be struck dead. He lost his religion around this point and started in on the bottle. (His talent, possibly psychologically conditioned, only has a range of the approximate diameter of a largish canvas tent.)—Don is gradually won over to their program of industrial espionage and sabotage (unsure at first of the latter). He raids the computers of other companies doing research in energy areas—stealing information and sometimes whole programs. The girl steals information—both technical and blackmailable—from the minds of their executives and agents. The psychokinetic crashes programs and damages equipment to slow research. Willy Boy "Jeremiah" Matthews provides coronaries and cerebrovascular accidents for really troublesome individuals. Their Boss muses occasionally that it would be really nice to locate a psychic pyrotechnic to round out the team. The company finally acquires its edge—and Don has learned all the facts and acquired a conscience kind of late in the game. He wants out. They can't let him go, knowing all that he does, and they are loath to dispose of him in a final sense because his talent is such a unique and valuable thing—it is possible that they would like to employ him again one day, and they are certain that some means of persuasion could be found. (They don't tell him this last part, of course.) He knows their ruthlessness and agrees to let a psychiatrist work him over with drugs and hypnosis, substituting false memories for his period of employment, hiding his talent even from himself, and implanting a painful suggestion of unquestioning acceptance with respect to the easy life in which they agree to set him up. This is done.

In switch-scenes, with the above flashbacks, Don first begins the mental spiralling, coils into the bank's computer and begins tracing the source of his monthly payments. In this first scene, he does not yet have full remembrance of all of this autobiography. He has enough to reason, however, that whoever is responsible for his way of life and his artificial amnesia does not want him poking around in that area. If he can determine their identity in this fashion, though, he can then pursue the matter of Cora's whereabouts, as he feels they are likely responsible for her removal as an instigating agent. (Detail some psychedelic type special effects as he runs up the computer records to a New York bank and learns that his money comes from the account of a New Jersey based oil company.) In the meantime, his old, as yet unremembered telepathic girlfriend has been flown down to keep watch on him. Monitoring him, she becomes aware of his discovery and of his resolution to travel to NJ to pursue the matter. On returning home to pack, he finds a message waiting, from her, advising him to lay off or the girl will be harmed. (Neither he nor the reader knows the source of the message at this point. The telepath has not yet reported her discovery to the home office. She wants to head him off if she can—to protect him, for old times' sake. She knows that the company will dispose of him if he becomes too troublesome. All this does is give him a slight time-advantage, however, allowing him to get a flight for NJ.) She tries to stop him again as he is boarding, with a full belting of telepathically induced premonitions of impending doom, visions of plane crashes, etc. (Again, the reader is not yet aware of her power or even her existence. She makes her appearance in some of the later flashbacks—keeping the effect eerie here.) Don is unswayed, however, and boards anyway. He can have other flashbacks on the way up. Offstage, she finally alerts her employers as to his imminent arrival. His old Boss meets him at the airport, uncertain as to exactly how much he recalls. Assuming everything, he makes several remarks which trigger another flashback as they walk near an empty freight-loading area where it seems safe to talk.

Willy Boy, whom the Boss had phoned earlier (offstage) is waiting there to put the snuff on Don when he comes within tent-range. He aims to scare him to lay off if the Boss gives the say-so. The Boss tells Don that Cora is alive and for the moment well, hostage to his good behavior. Don gives a hard and scathing response. The Boss gives the sign and Willy Boy commences the holy roller attack. Don suffers severe chest pains and an abrupt shortness of breath. At this moment, however, a piece of automatic freight-loading equipment is somehow activated. It runs amok, smashing Willy Boy with its swinging boom, aborting his attack and providing Don with the opportunity to strike his former employer and escape. A long pursuit-sequence then commences (other guys about), employing some standard human goons as well as the psychokinetic, who can hopefully arrange an accident.

III

At first, Don is merely fleeing—and flashbacking—and his pursuers are thwarted in several more attempts on his life by peculiar coincidences, always involving computer-controlled equipment. Running, hitchhiking, using public transportation, he gains a little breathing time by stealing a computer-controlled vehicle. These cars are only equipped to travel on certain designated highways possessed of subterranean steering implants. He is able to acquire the car by means of something he had never attempted before—the provision of mental programming input. Always, before, he had only passively monitored the behavior of data-processing equipment. The car does respond to his control attempts, though, and as he speeds along, he travels back telepathically via the car's mind, via the underground monitors to the central computer regulating all the vehicle movements on the highway, adjusting its picture of the entire traffic-flow, to erase himself from a search-pattern for a stolen vehicle. He uses its connections to other regulating and data-processing equipment to gain remote-control access to the NJ company's central computer. It is hedged about with sophisticated defenses against penetration, but one by one they begin to fall in flashy Coil Effect sequences interspersed with any remaining flashbacks. (Here, he remembers his old girlfriend and begins to understand what happened in Florida, re them causing his inaction and how the pre flight terrors were induced.)—He had not been quick enough on the erasure, however—or rather too quick or simply wrong. The car's responder trail, furthered by its apparent disappearance in the vicinity of his last known whereabouts, has caused the vehicle to become the object of a physical search by his pursuers—as they do not trust computer data in situations where he is involved. He is spotted from the air—as a vehicle not matching its description in the traffic-control unit (he had changed its designation)—and an auto accident is planned for him.—He lowers the NJ computer defenses right before the accident, learning Cora's whereabouts—at an experimental solar power installation in New Mexico—and right before the crash, he encounters the small system anomaly he had met with during the period of his vegetative existence long ago.

IV

It proves a freak accident, involving the car's leaving the road, falling a good distance and burning. Don jumps out easily as the program instructs and is unharmed. He continues to make his way across country, circumventing computerized locks on freight transports. In the meantime, his former Boss discovers that the crashed vehicle does not contain his body. He suspects that Don has discovered Cora's whereabouts by the means with which he is most proficient. He rushes to the NM installation, taking the telepath, the psychokinetic, and the psionic (Willy Boy) with him. He makes the place ready. So Don is able to enter the installation with surprising ease. The place appears deserted. But the Boss's voice comes over the public address system, following him about as he searches, explaining that the only way he can leave the place alive is by accepting his old job again. There is a lot more work waiting for him; the competition is still trying very hard. The telepath relays his decision in the negative to the Boss, who has set up shop in the installation's nerve center. He has taken Cora with him. The psychokinetic, in the meantime, has set up all sorts of booby traps about the grounds and in the building—small objects which may suddenly spring to life and attack Don. The first of these begins its assault. He avoids several, is struck by some but not halted. While he is wrestling with an airborne monkey wrench, the telepath arrives, and the attack ceases, as she has startled the psychokinetic with a cry of "It's alive! It's here with us!"—Don has just been permitted to remember the return of the anomaly, and she has read it in his mind! The world data-network had, somewhere along the line of increasing complexity, acquired sentience. It had been keeping the development of its existence to itself, but it will go out of its way to assist Don, because of their unique relationship. He had only recovered his senses years before because it had invaded the hospital computer, analyzed his medical file, and altered the prescriptions for his medication. It has meant to protect him along his journey westward by means of all the peculiar computer accidents which occurred on his behalf. It had not made itself known to him during his employment with the company because it came to fear and later disapprove of the company. It was unable to reach him during his period of induced amnesia and non-use of his ability. This time around, it had kept itself hidden because it feared that the telepath would discover its secret within Don's mind. Now, though, the time is right; the knowledge of its existence comes as a distraction. Circuits begin to overload. The phone catches fire. Boss, psychokinetic, psionic, telepath, and Cora flee. Giant mirrors begin turning, focusing. Focused, that light consumes the Boss, the psychokinetic, and the psionic. They turn toward the telepath. Don steps in front of her and pleads for her life. The mirrors turn away. A computer-controlled vehicle rushes toward them, hurrying to hasten their escape from the area. Cora enters. As the telepath follows her, the door slams suddenly, striking her, throwing her against the dash, rendering her unconscious. When she awakens later, Don is told by the computer-sentience, she will have memories of having worked for several years in a small town in southern Illinois, where she had been employed as a sales clerk. She will not remember her ability as she sails in Puget Sound, she will not remember her powers. It is reviving her because of the connection she had had with Don when she was a friend. The company is about to come upon bad times. Its competitors' positions will continue to strengthen. As Don holds Cora's hand and stares ahead, he asks the machine-sentience what it needs him for. A conscience, it replies. Don thinks about it, then allows that it probably does and that he will try.

A Word from Zelazny

Zelazny wrote this outline in the 1980s but abandoned it. Fred Saberhagen wrote a longer outline from it, which Zelazny used to write *Coils*. "Fred is very good at outlining things. I had this general idea which I put into writing, about 14 or 16 pages. Fred broke that down into a very detailed chapter-by-chapter outline of the action. When he fed those back to me, I was able to follow it very closely. I could run those through the typewriter very quickly. As a result, it was much faster working with Fred than with Phil [Dick, on *Deus Irae*]. That stretched over a year [actually almost eight years], while working with Fred lasted a couple of months."[1]

Notes

This is the first outline, taken from Zelazny's handwritten manuscript. Set down in tiny script, it covers four pages of stationery from the Albuquerque Hilton Inn and is untitled—but using "Coils" here is consistent with the novel. The version sent to Saberhagen was likely a revision.

The underscored blank spaces appear on the manuscript, indicating that Zelazny had not yet chosen names for the characters.

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[1] *Bryan-College Station Eagle* Sec C. p 14. April 10, 1982.

ALIEN SPEEDWAY
(OUTLINE)

Written 1985; previously unpublished.

"The race is not always to the swift but that's the way to bet.
DAMON RUNYON

Time

Circa AD 2500.

Protagonist

Mike MacAlister Murray was orphaned at the age of 12 and thereafter raised by his mother's sister, Anna Quaid. Upon her death when he is 16 and out of relatives to be farmed out to, he is about to become a ward of the state for two years. Either that or cut out quick and try to make it on his own.

Living near the downside docks of a spaceport in Florida, he has grown up in the shadow of space travel. He hangs around the port in his spare time and has become acquainted with many of the people who are employed there. But it is not freighters that he cares about—nor even the fancy tech ships of Survey. It is the sleek, powerful (and seldom seen here) racers of which he has heard and read and seen on his homeset, of which he is enamored. His greatest desire is to be a racing pilot—a member of a very small sporting elite.

Mike is 5'8" and still growing, is fairly thin, has dark eyes and an unruly thatch of dark hair through which he often runs his hand or shakes back when nervous. He had a fondness for mutated macadamia nuts (which grow to be about the size of plums), with a light, sweet glaze to them. If he has some extra change he often has a bag of them in his jacket pocket.

He has heard of the Clypsis System, where the greatest racers of all torch their ships through system-wide courses. It is a tough, dangerous, and very rewarding occupation with more than a little glamour to it.

He is experienced to about the fullest extent one can be under his circumstances, in that he has spent hours every day since he was small flying ships by computer simulation—a practice at which he is extraordinarily gifted. He has taken the entire computerized general space pilot's training course as well as a number of specialized ones, and he has received his certificates for simulation-training.

Getting up to the orbiting docks is no special trick. He had worked as part of a loading crew the previous summer, and a friend at the downside docks is willing to help him. He feels that, once he is at the orbiting docks, he might be able to find work and passage aboard some outbound vessel which could get him near to Clypsis, where he hopes to get some kind of job—any kind—in the great racing system.

His friend helps him reach the upside docks, but already the authorities are inquiring after his whereabouts. (Actually, it has to do with his aunt's estate at this point more than the matter of his custody. But he does not realize this—and having lined up a berth aboard a disreputable freighter whose captain is not too concerned about papers being in order, he departs without responding to messages from an Earthside attorney. There is an estate, larger than he would have guessed, to which he is sole heir—though he could not have collected the money, anyway, till age 18.—I inject this because such a windfall may come in handy later on. Say, he needs the money for initiation and fees for joining the Racers Association or somesuch, and is finally traced to Clypsis at about that time.)

Josiah Bent, captain of the disreputable freighter (a smuggler), takes him through several shady freight hauls and a brush or two with authorities before leaving him in a system near to Clypsis, whence he must make his own way. Mike does not feel great qualms over the illicit adjuncts to his passage, knowing that many of the racers had started out as interstellar smugglers—much as many of the early stock car racers (such as Junior Johnson) had started out running illegal whisky in souped-up cars. In fact, his arrival in the Dystra System in the company of a smuggler works to his benefit, in that it is noted by a racer (Jass Blando) on his way to Clypsis—a man who had once been a smuggler himself—who is inclined thereby to give him a lift, though offering small encouragement for his dream of one day being a racer. Blando later washes out in a qualifying heat and takes a job at Pitfall where he intends to work for a year or so and look for backing to try again. (He might well be a recurring character, as an older, experienced person to whom Mike could turn for advice.)

Mike is able to get the lowest ground maintenance crew job available (practically sweeping floors, at first), and he begins the process of working his way up while learning about the racing ships from the very bottom.

He hangs around the cafés and concourses, hoping to catch sight of some of the racing pilots, though most of them tend to hang out in more exclusive quarters when staying at Pitfall rather than the funky sections filled with the equivalents of diners, drive-ins, motels and cheap bars which Mike at first associates with them as part of an image from homeset entertainments.

He meets a strange, faceless automaton when he is off-duty and spending time in the computerized library, studying racing history and a programmed course toward a certificate in fusion engineering. (This encounter is actually by design, though the meeting seems accidental at the time. He has been getting very good scores on the programmed tests, and the Brain Bank's file on him is quite sketchy. The automaton is there to elicit information and to do an on-the-spot evaluation.) Mike lucks out in this encounter because he had long been a fan of the legendary racer Speedball Raybo, who had died a century earlier. He knows the man's biography and all of his racing statistics. The automaton *is* Speedball Raybo. Many of the great racers have had their psyches recorded, and they are maintained on file in the Brain Bank. There, they may be either actively maintained or kept dormant. And should a situation require, a recorded psyche can be transferred to an automaton body and even pilot a ship if necessary—but they are barred from normal racing competition. (Though such individuals periodically engage in special races—the best facing the best from many eras.) Speedball is of course flattered that Mike is an admirer of his, and he puts in a good word for him later when it comes to getting him a job on a racer's staff (which eventually leads to his apprenticeship).

(For what it's worth, APCs—Artificial Psyche Constructs—have also been created by the Bank, based on everything known and extrapolated concerning great racers who lived before the recording process had been perfected—including dirtbound racers of autos, for whom a certain kinship is felt. Thus, Mike could at some point or other encounter the automaton-version of Mario Andretti, A. J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones, Phil Hill, Wolfgang von Trips, etc. —Perhaps even a few WWI fighter pilots could be included for an interesting viewpoint—or even Lindbergh.)

Clypsis

There was never any intelligent life in the Clypsis System, and opponents of CA racing say that there still isn't. Be that as it may, the entire system has been rebuilt—*i.e.*, reworked into a designed pattern and colorful course especially suited for racing. The sun has a miniature black hole in orbit about it (well, technically they're both in orbit about a point near to the sun's surface, but the visual effect is that of a stream of blazing plasma sucked upward, narrowing, terminating at the black hole into which it is being drawn—the black hole orbiting the primary and dragging the plasma sheet after it like a sail of fire: this phenomenon—contrived to be colorful, as well as to provide tricky tidal forces for the racers to contend with on inner-system courses—is known as the Dragon's Claw).

Various courses may be set for various races. *E.g.*, a full-system race means that the pilots must pass within range of the proximity monitors orbiting all eight planets—necessitating some extra braking action for that much of a drop into the gravity well.

There are intentionally "dirty"—flak-filled, instrument-foiling—areas orbiting the primary, also, to add a series of obstacles to be avoided or negotiated as a pilot sees fit.

There are also orbiting stations for pit stops as well as emergency ground-based stations on the various worlds. For the colder, outer planets, the pit stops are in the vicinity of artificial mini-suns orbiting nearby and producing energy for solar-powered equipment (as well as some colorful visual effects and possible hazards).

There are also damper-satellites—random hazards which may or may not be turned on, according to the requirements of any particular race in terms of obstacles: these are satellites which can screw up a ship's sensors for, say, half an hour should the vessel pass through their spheres of influence.

Pitfall

Pitfall is the gigantic advanced O'Neill tube which serves as headquarters for the Clypsis Racing League. Racing vessels are overhauled and modified here. The place contains a variety of environments for the residence of various alien racing pilots. It is completely self-contained, a large cosmopolitan center. It is also the location of the Brain Bank.

Ship manufacturers are represented here, as they wish to study vehicle performance with the latest modifications under these high-stress conditions. They also like to keep an eye on the new pilots, and they will also sometimes put up money to back young racers just getting started, hoping for eventual product publicity.

Manufacturers of other items often hang around, seeking deals involving product endorsements from the more prominent racers.

Off-track betting (*i.e.*, bets not going through the Brain Bank, offering different odds) may be completely legit; also, it may not. Both kinds of people are involved. An attempted fix of a big race is not unknown. Nor occasional sabotage—nor even attempts to gimmick the proximity monitors to show an earlier (or later) arrival and departure for a particular racer.

There are fans, bettors, backers, bookies, product sponsors, product designers, sports reporters and various hangers-on at Pitfall at all times. Lots of money is floating about. There are also all of the normal goods & services people on hand not directly involved in the racing, people of the sort one would find in any normal city of the times.

Brain Bank

Not all of the Racing League and Racing Commission Directors are incarnate. Some, whose bodies are dead, continue to exist as individual entities—on hold or activated—within the Pitfall computers, as with some of the old pilots.

The Operations Committee of the League establishes the courses for particular races and monitors their progress. A separate committee manages the official ("on track") betting on the races. A personnel committee hires the employees of the racing establishment and occasionally makes recommendations to racers in terms of young trainees showing potential for apprenticeship. Another League group also acts as agent, dealing with backers and sponsors seeking investments, though the better-known pilots tend to make their own deals. Another maintains Pitfall. Another is responsible for facilities elsewhere in the Clypsis System.

All of these functions are heavily computerized, with a sentient computer program also holding a seat on several of the committees. This program—MIDNITE (for Master of Integrated Data Network and Intelligence Transfer Engineer)—is also the entity responsible for transferring computerized intelligences into automatized bodies and vice-versa, as well as recording psyches worth preserving. At the time this story opens, MIDNITE is Chairman of the Racing League.

The computers and the computerized intelligences are generally referred to as the Brain Bank.

Those directly responsible for the conduct of the races—whether Brain Bank or ambient humans and aliens are sometimes referred to as the Masters of the Race.

Suggestion: I kind of like MIDNITE, who, I think, could be made capable of body-to-body transfer of live psyches, also, but who keeps this ability under wraps—perhaps using it at the last minute, switching minds when a villain has just slain a good guy.

MIDNITE is also very much a racing fan.

The Ships They Race

The racing vessels are known as CA flamers (for continuous acceleration) or SB blasters (for steady-burn). They are fusion-powered vehicles and can burn damn near anything for fuel (including the flak) and are equipped with very sophisticated course computers. They accelerate (at whatever rate the pilot is willing to tolerate or chance) for about half of the lap to the monitor point or pit stop and then begin deceleration firing for the approach.

The vessels are engineered to utilize some inertial redirection (say, up to 50%), reducing the stress on the pilots, increasing it proportionately on the vessels. This is accomplished by means of a partial stasis field about the pilot, extending to the bulkheads. It absorbs some inertial force and redistributes it—and in the process slows the pilot's movements (and subjective sense of time-passage) in direct ratio to the amount of transferred force (*e.g.*, a 20% offset of the G stress cuts the pilot's reaction time by a fifth). There are also stress medications the pilots use to minimize the effects of constant acceleration over a prolonged period of time.

Note: While subspace travel is used between the stars, it is totally impractical within a system. So the races are run in Newtonian terms.

One consideration, therefore, is how much stress a pilot is willing to place upon himself/herself and the machine. (Mike's lesser mass is slightly to his advantage here.) There are general guidelines in the computer as to safe acceleration tolerances, but you never win races by following them. The best pilots do take risks, at times relying on their feeling for their equipment.

This is the main reason the automata are barred from racing, save against one another. Their artificial bodies are far less disturbed by the increased inertia. (Some of the alien pilots—those from worlds of greater than one Earth-mass—also have a small edge in the matter of absorbing acceleration stress. All the aliens who race, however, still fall within Earth-human parameters in this—and the benefit shows up mainly as a matter of personal comfort. They take less medication or fly with a slightly weaker stasis field.)

A Bit of History and Cultural Background

Quantum and relativity physics were merged in a sophisticated General Unified Theory in the early 21st century. The universe seems to be an 11-dimensional manifold, with interstellar travel possible via a 10D Butterfly Catastrophe (an elaboration of René Thom's Catastrophe Theory). The cat. paths are called subspace, though technically this is a misnomer. Their use constitutes a danger only if the cat. crosses the path of a singularity, for the other side of the black hole phenomenon occurs here, and white holes spew the reduced matter-energy along strange curvings of the manifold. (I throw this extra stuff in for a reason. See **Story Suggestions**.)

Anyhow, once interstellar travel became possible (late 21st, early 22nd centuries) the Survey was set up, seeking new worlds.

Some were found colonizable and were promptly colonized; others were already inhabited. Some of these inhabited worlds contained humanoids; others did not. Mid to late 23rd century saw planoforming and partial dysonizing beginning. Clypsis was set up by a consortium of entrepreneurs, many of them people with money to launder, near the close of the 23rd century. The sport was not particularly respectable at first.

But CA racing shortly became one of the symbols of a new, wealthy age, and the ships represented a kind of wild freedom, a jets-flaming breaking-away from the old social order. Now, though, the ex-smugglers and tough-talking ex-military people who've made big names for themselves in the sport often reside elsewhere in high luxury and come to Clypsis for their races aboard elegant luxury liners or top-of-the-line personal spacecraft. It was not this way when it started, and it still isn't for everyone. The sport became popular because of what it represented—and when money began to pour in it grew more respectable.

A number of wars were fought, beginning several centuries preceding the opening of this story, the nastiest involving the Poldavians (a blue-skinned people) and the Merkeks (who look as if perpetually sunburnt), culminating in the Merkeks causing the Poldavians' sun to go nova. The survivors—those who were off-world, out of the system at the time—and their descendants became a race of wanderers and the stuff of legend—a highly skilled people without a world, bound together by strong cultural traditions and the horror of their past.

Story Suggestions

The obvious coming of age, rite of passage theme will probably dominate the first volume, culminating in Mike's full acceptance as an apprentice racing pilot and his actual participation in his first race as a copilot/understudy. A rivalry in this first book would probably be good for purposes of conflict—between Mike and another apprentice to the same pilot. Say a female apprentice, humanoid, of whom the pilot (different variety humanoid) seems fond and more deeply committed to train.

The backgrounds of the various pilots—smugglers, engine designers, military—may make for conflicts as well as friendships. I can also see a Poldavian pilot in a racing duel with a Merkek pilot.—And a dying pilot, out to win a big purse before cashing in is another possible theme or subplot. —Also a renegade—a pilot with a price on his head, who would be arrested should he ever leave the Clypsis System. (Maybe he's a nice guy who's trying to raise money for expensive investigations and attorney fees to clear himself. Or maybe he's a hardened war criminal and this is like the Foreign Legion for him, only a lot more comfortable.)

Also, see the attached discussion by Feinberg and Shapiro as to the possibility of a plasma life form evolving inside a star. Could such a creature evolve—using the same lines of reasoning—within the constantly burning fusion engine of a CA vessel during a full-system race? The ship's computer could inform the pilot and could possibly communicate with it for him. Would it be murder to shut down the engine? Could the plasmobe—or sun devil—help them in any fashion during a predicament—say, in the inner system? While a black hole would destroy matter in its normal states, might a being consisting only of ionized charges be able to pass through a singularity and emerge intact in cat. space? A fun notion to play with.

I see the first book as Mike's racing apprenticeship, the second as an adventure story in the company of his pilot, the third as his achieving full pilothood at the end of another adventure, the fourth as his first solo race with complications, and in the final two it would be fun to race him against some of the automata of great racers of the past, and in the other it would be interesting to pair him up with such a pilot.

There ought to be an attempted fix involved somewhere and perhaps a legendary Nick the Greek type gambler as a recurring figure; also, some industrial-type spying, as new equipment gets tried out by manufacturers in some of the races; a rescue mission may well be in order somewhere along the line, too; and it might also be interesting to get MIDNITE himself/herself/itself into an automaton (or brain-dead humanoid body) for a race.

Further Story Considerations

While the first book will require the biographical and apprenticeship material, as discussed, one possibility for the conflict's resolution would be for the female apprentice to wind up a Sleeping

Beauty figure—her body severely injured and being slowly reconstructed in a growth tank, her mind on hold in the Brain Bank and only occasionally awake—only alive at all because of Mike's having rescued her. The master pilot carries a torch for her and waits. He is now kindly disposed toward Mike for his having saved her.

For another book I had in mind the possibility of the sun devil story, with perhaps a larger story of the smuggling of an illegal neurostimulation drug. The drug (RIPE) speeds up a pilot's reaction and perception time, though it is dangerous and may permanently damage a person's nervous system. I was thinking of canisters of the stuff orbiting in one of the artificial dead zones set up as race hazards—dropped there by out-of-system smugglers, to be picked up by some shady racer who knows their coordinates and taken back to Pitfall on his return, as the racers do not pass through any kind of customs search. (A strange list of coordinates could be a clue.) The dying alien may well be using this drug. Wants one big win, is dying anyway, what the hell…

Another story line which occurs to me involves a group of illicit off-track bookies employing sabotage to assure winners. I see them as finally tripped up by an undercover investigator (who has long seemed just a pest and hanger-on) for one of the companies which builds one line of the racing ships and does not want its vessels wrongly discredited. Mike and his racing-master could lose this race but see it later declared invalid and scheduled to be re-run.

Another story could involve Mike's first Big Race—against, among others, Blando (who is happy to take the place or show purse) and also against the outlaw racer and the Merkekian and Poldavian pilots who are engaged in their group race. MIDNITE could intervene when it threatens to become a death duel by remotely seizing control of the ships and sending them off course to protect everybody. Unfortunately, this hasty though necessary action creates new dangers and requires a rescue mission by those not in immediate jeopardy. This would cause at least a partial reconciliation of the principal enemies.

Also, I like the idea of a story where Mike races in the company of an automaton observer assigned to him by MIDNITE, reasons unknown. There is a grave danger to Pitfall and the Brain Bank. The automaton is MIDNITE, who has escaped in this fashion from CAPO (for Computer Adaptation Program Offset), a parasite program entered into the Brain Bank by some unscrupulous individuals who are seeking to take over, rig the odds and betting, juggle the books, and siphon funds. **MIDNITE**, in flight, is regrouping for a return encounter with **CAPO**. Learning a lesson from the Dragon's Claw, **MIDNITE** absorbs **CAPO** and reduces it to subroutines to function like antibodies against any future attempts at computer parasitism.

I could also see **MIDNITE** in another story as entering a race in a brain-blanked human body ("blankie") to test Mike's mettle, intending personal disqualification afterwards if he ends up in a leading position. For that matter, I'd like to see Mike in an automaton body sometime, so that he can race against some of the great racers of the past. (And perhaps, sometime, forced at least unofficially to race against them in his own body, pitting his skills against their skills plus artificial anatomy.) Also, there could be a point where we return Mike to Earth finally to straighten his affairs back home and get him into a situation requiring CA piloting within our solar system.

I also see the possibility of Mike's being severely injured at some point and becoming a dozing denizen of the Brain Bank while his body recovers—and then later, restored to normal, being afraid that he has lost his nerve. At this point, a new species of tough alien pilots could turn up, also. Then, there is the later possibility of Mike taking on a strange apprentice of his own. Also, it would be interesting to have Mike, unknowing, race against an automaton or blankie containing his own recorded psyche, for his first loss—if you can really lose to yourself.

A Word from Zelazny

In 1985 Zelazny outlined the characters, spacecraft, storyline and solar system for the ultimate race track in space. A visual artist designed the spacecraft, and two writers wrote the first three books based on this outline. Although *Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway* was planned to run six books, only three appeared, apparently due to disappointing sales. The three novels included *Clypsis* by Jeffrey A. Carver (1987) and *Pitfall* and *The Web* by Thomas Wylde (both 1988). The ideas in this outline also figured in "Deadboy Donner and the Filstone Cup," demonstrating that Zelazny couldn't resist writing in a world similar to his design for this series.

Zelazny said, "Long before I wrote *Damnation Alley* I knew a certain fascination for fast, powerful vehicles. I do not know whether this had anything to do with having grown up on a street where drag racers could regularly be heard revving their engines late at night, followed by the shriek of tires as they took off, generally in the direction of Lakeland Boulevard. Occasionally, there would be an accident, and once a fellow I knew made the front page of the local paper by emerging unscathed from a totaled vehicle, just a few doors up the street from me…

"Now it has often struck me that there is nearly always a good story to be had in dealing with extremes—the biggest or the smallest of something, the first, the last. So when a notion involving the biggest racetrack and the fastest vehicles came up, I pursued it. The *Alien Speedway* series was, in effect, to be the story of the Big Racetrack in the Sky, the place where the greatest races and fastest vehicles would come together for the most exciting races ever run. It was also to be the story of a young man whose great desire was to go there and become a part of it, to race…"[1]

Notes

Mario Andretti, **A. J. Foyt**, **Parnelli Jones**, **Phil Hill**, **Wolfgang von Trips** are auto racing champions. Charles **Lindbergh** piloted the *Spirit of St. Louis* in the first solo, non-stop flight across the Atlantic. **René Thom's Catastrophe Theory** is a mathematical model that describes the effects of change and discontinuity in systems. A system at rest will remain in a preferred stable state or range of states. Subjected to change forces, a system will try to absorb the forces and regain its preferred stable state. If the change forces are too strong and cannot be absorbed, a catastrophic change occurs in the system, and a new stable state (or range of states) is achieved. A **Butterfly Catastrophe** is one of a dozen or so different forms of instability named for its resemblance to a butterfly when graphed in two dimensions. A **singularity** is the mathematical representation of an infinity, such as the infinite warping of spacetime at the center of a black hole. In their 1980 book *Life Beyond Earth: The Intelligent Earthling's Guide to Life in the Universe* by Gerald **Feinberg** and Robert **Shapiro** postulated that structureless "plasma" life might exist in the Sun at temperatures of millions of degrees. Zelazny later returned to this concept in the collaboration *Flare*. Nicholas Andreas Dandalos or **"Nick the Greek"** was a professional gambler and high roller notorious for winning and losing large sums of money.

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[1] *Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway Book 1: Clypsis*, by Jeffrey Carver, Bantam Spectra 1987.

THE AHRIMAN FACTOR
(OUTLINE)

Written in 1981, revised in 1987; previously unpublished.

This story is intended to proceed in two time periods, in the manner of Trevanian's *Shibumi*. I would like for it to alternate, chapter by chapter, between the 12th century and the 21st. The medieval story line will be set in the Near East and will deal with the conflict between the Assassins and the Knights Templar during the Second Crusade, culminating in the breaking of the Templars at the Horns of Hattin in 1187. (I enclose a copy of the pertinent chapter from *The Crusades*, by Henry Treece—"Assassins, Templars and Hospitallers"—which contains most of the factual information with which we will be playing free and easy.)

Nothing need be stated explicitly, early in the narrative, to indicate that Thomas Amnet of Normandy, Templar, is, in some fashion, also Tom Gurden, the troubled 21st century nightclub pianist and singer, whom we first meet with a long block of dialogue with a psychiatrist we only gradually discover to be a computer.

(I'd thought of setting off the chapters with quotes from *The Rubaiyat*, in that Omar Khayyam had apparently been a friend of Hasan-as-Sabah, founder of the Hashishiyun, or Assassins. I'll enclose a copy.)

Tom Gurden's story line is to detail his peculiar life in part by means of a series of conversations with the computer-shrink, commencing with the initial interview where he consults it to determine whether he is suffering from paranoid delusions as the police have suggested or whether someone might really be trying to kill him. The machine seems to be more interested in his psychiatric history, however, once it discovers that there is such background indicating multiple personality-style schizophrenia.

Meanwhile, back in the 12th century, imposed upon the sequence of events in the Treece essay, the Assassins and the Knights Templar—in this story, anyway—will be engaged in their conflict which is as economic as political, military, theological. The Templars' Order became quite wealthy and even indulged in international banking operations. I'd like to view them here as having a kind of prototype Medici business in this respect—lending money to hard-up nobles (including those who've taken Crusader vows and need cash to finance their expeditions to the Holy Land), estate lands as security, and picking up European properties this way, and occasionally knocking them down to powerful clerical and political patrons for preference and protection for the Order, turning profits from the nobility's extravagances and from the nascent middle class in the expanding urban centers, from improvident monarchs…

(Background digression, of three parenthetical paragraphs, which may or may not find use for period flavor: I read a good book on these times a while back—*The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, by Charles Homer Haskins. He'd never much cared for references we'd inherited from Burkhardt, calling the Italian Quattrocento "the Renaissance," in that the term implied that nothing much had happened during the previous thousand years from the fall of Rome up until then. He posited several high points during that time which might be considered renaissances of a sort, and he went into considerable detail on this aspect of the twelfth century. There were four things which he felt characterized the twelfth century in this respect: 1) this was the period which saw the end of the Romanesque architecture and the beginnings of Gothic; 2) it was in the twelfth century that, for the first time, the educated minority began writing in the vernacular rather than exclusively in Latin; 3) it was in the twelfth century (barely) that the great universities of Europe saw their humble beginnings; and 4) the increasingly large and complex urban centers of the period were growing more difficult to administer at this time, and Roman Law was resurrected and reintroduced to provide relatively uniform civil and criminal codes for the towns.

(Also, though Haskins didn't address himself to it, this was the time of the troubadours and courtly love. And if you see any use for materials of this sort, I've a copy of Jack Lindsay's *The Troubadors and Their World*, which contains essays about and poetry samples by many of the better-known troubadours. For an interesting factual note, their "alba" or "dawn song" of the lover returning from spending a night with his mistress apparently has its roots in earlier Arabic models.

(An undercurrent I'd like shown, too, is that most of the Crusaders were Norman French—our 12th century protagonist included—and that they're still not completely removed from some influence from their Viking forebears—with a possible berserker Templar or an occasional reference to a Norse deity. Say, a "Saint Baldur!" or a "Holy Thor!" for an oath.)

The Assassins, on the other hand, were also growing wealthy, though they went about it differently. I'd like to suggest that they were doing something similar in the Moslem world to what the Templars were doing in Europe (*i.e.*, empire-building, with Hasan moved by a kind of proto-nationalistic impulse, causing him to rule through puppets he can bribe or intimidate). It might even be interesting to show the heads of both organizations occasionally talking as if they are looking ahead to an eventual stabilization of the area—with European Christians in Outremer in league with Byzantium, opening many doors for international trade and banking operations on a large scale. But the impulse is doomed, as both sides in general are fanatical in terms of their own ideals and means—the Assassins with their drugs and Secret Garden out of legend, and the Templars, who've been described as the closest thing in Western culture to the Samurai, with their military expertise, their devotion to the head of their Order as if he were a shogun, to their eccentric brand of Christianity (some say it was tinged with black magic—perhaps to include Norse deities?) in the place of Zen. I will enclose photocopies of the appendices to Edith Simon's *Piebald Standard*, listing the Order's heads, the Popes, the Byzantine and Holy Roman Emperors, and the French and English Kings of the periods involved. Thomas Amnet was the Keeper of the Stone (Secret Master within the Order) at the time of the slaughter at the Horns of Hattin; Tom Gurden, by extension, can be taken as the Order's final head—despite the later nominal heads—in that he was the last Keeper of the Stone, which was broken at his death, following Hattin. I'll get back to the Stone business, shortly.

I wanted to superimpose this structure on the general rhythm of events in the Treece essay, with Sheikh Sinan the nominal head of the Assassins up to and through the Horns of Hattin, with Hasan (long thought dead, but actually alive and running the show from behind the scenes). The same for Gerard de Ridefort as head of the Templars, with Thomas Amnet the power behind him. The Templars will be managing their temporal, political affairs through the man they saw crowned, King Guy de Lusignan of Jerusalem, while the Assassins succeed in turning their erstwhile enemy, Saladin, into a manageable quantity—cowing him with that bit of business described on pp. 185–86 of the Treece essay.

While the destruction at the Horns of Hattin is taking place, Thomas Amnet and Hasan-as-Sabah are meeting on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (probably somewhere a bit N of Tiberias—see Map 6 among the maps of the area I've enclosed, from Steven Runciman's *History of the Crusades*) to settle their differences by means of a sorcerous duel (with many intercuts to the slaughter at the Horns), a duel which the Old Man of the Mountains wins—its effects to be detailed shortly.

(Reynald of Châtillon is a fascinating character. But the only use I can really think of for him within this version of events, if we're going to use him at all, is as a double turncoat to the Assassins and Templars. Did he want to take over one of these organizations? Both? Did he think that they could be combined, with himself as the head of this new power?)

So much, for now, for motivations beyond, or in addition to, the usual Crusader v. Saracen business. In contemporary times the Assassins are PLO-like terrorist masterminds, behind what are ostensibly a number of Middle East nationalisms but actually promoting acts calculated to enhance Assassin interests—in shipping, weapons, oil, drugs, as well as to eliminate enemies. The surviving Templar organization is more "old money," as they're living on conservative investments while keeping an eye out for the return of Thomas Amnet.

I'd thought to make the modern Tom Gurden a jazz pianist to give him a dimension apart from all of the above. Something in the arts seemed an easy way of adding another overlay to his personality. I'll include a copy of a 10-page essay on the jazz pianist Dick Wellstood for some lumber in this regard.

Re some of the background stuff which seems at first to distract the computer-psychiatrist from Tom's immediate problems:

The computer is more concerned about Tom's past record than his current problems, in that it had never before encountered a case involving multiple personalities similar to this. As a teenager Tom had one day decided that he was destined to destroy the world. He had then spent two years reading technical literature and had set about constructing an atomic bomb. He had attempted to detonate this device in Los Angeles. The detonator had gone off, but the bomb itself did not. Two people were injured. He then spent over a year in a juvenile psychiatric facility, where it was learned that he believed himself to have been a French terrorist at the time of the Revolution. He spoke fluent French at that time and had a good knowledge of the Revolution, but he had been studying these subjects in school. He was diagnosed as schizophrenic and treated—successfully, they said. A year or so following his release, however, he was doing time in Alabama for shooting a storekeeper during a robbery. This was followed by a massive personality shift which resulted in his becoming a revivalist preacher after his release, as he believed himself to have been a New England preacher in the early nineteenth century. These sentiments were tempered, however, when he came to feel that he had been a Marine who had died on Tarawa in WW II. After this experience, he grew more stable, managed to get admitted to a university, went through for a degree, received good grades, tried a variety of occupations, always playing piano on the side, finally decided that the music was what he liked best, and started doing it full-time. He acknowledges the seeming reality of the sensations of the other lives he has experienced, yet he is not necessarily a believer in reincarnation. He feels that something else was involved in every instance.

The computer is obviously set upon pursuing the matter of the multiple personalities. Tom is just as obviously reticent concerning them, and anxious to check out the simpler matter of whether he is paranoid or really has an enemy who wishes to kill him.

At one point during a non-telephone interview—in a booth at the building where the machine is actually housed—Tom inadvertently touches the computer terminal, producing an odd effect which reverberates all the way to the central processing unit and results in the computer's becoming more amenable to his wishes. He is not certain at this point exactly what it was that occurred.

He remains in touch with the computer via telephone and occasional visits to remote terminals throughout the narrative. A chase sequence begins early. Someone is indeed out to kill him. Someone else is trying to protect him. These are the Watchers—Assassin and Templar. It has taken a long while for his enemies to locate him this time, though his protectors had found him somewhat earlier and had been doing a number of things to accelerate the process which is taking place within him.

Each time he had experienced a personality overlay he had been in the presence of a different fragment of a dark stone. The first few had been inadvertencies, such as a piece lying in a ditch where his prison crew had been clearing weeds, and the things would only affect a susceptible individual—and such persons are rare. Each of the persons he had believed himself to have been had also been such a sensitive person. Each had been exposed to the stone chips; each had experienced something similar involving an even earlier, basic, matrix life, and each—if the stone remained long in his possession—had had his own internal experiences recorded by the stone, to be made available to the next susceptible person who came in contact with it (those secondary life-experiences are more faded, tenuous, dreamlike, however, to the next susceptible individual—and there also seem to be tertiaries, etc.). Deep beneath it all, though, seems to lie something basic, archetypal and a bit frightening... And a susceptible person once exposed tends to attract other stone chips, building up a body of these experiences. When such a one reaches a certain critical point, his presence becomes discernible to the Watchers, both friends and enemies. The enemies attempt to destroy the person before he can recover the total personality toward which the phenomenon is leading. The protectors, who possess some of the fragments, guard the person and intentionally expose him to more of them. (Tom could pick up a few more quickies along the way, should such experiences seem appropriate for underlining something.)

The stones are pieces of the Philosopher's Stone which had been shattered by the Old Man of the Mountains (Hasan-as-Sabah), the Assassin chief, at the conclusion of the half-physical, half-magical duel between himself and Thomas Amnet of Normandy, alchemist, magician, and Knight Templar Keeper of the Stone, at the time of the battle at the Horns of Hattin, etc. (Use of the Stone's transmutational ability had helped to build the Templars' fortunes. The Stone's Keeper, because of a necessary proximity, was strangely affected by it, attuned to it, his mind finally recorded within it.) The psyche-recording ability of the Stone has continued throughout history, even in its fragmented form—Tom's mind representing one of the more successful reassemblies to date. The Assassin chief, Hasan, having gone by many names over the years, still lives (he possesses the Elixir Vitae), running the modern incarnation of his organization.

The modern version of the Templars wants to restore Thomas's mind as the knight-alchemist-magician may be able to help them destroy the last of the Assassins this time around. Both sides possess some fragments of the Stone.

Tom's body is actually beginning to evolve some of the alchemical powers of the Stone. His touching of the computer's terminal had begun a transmutational effect within the machine, resulting in shifting it toward a true, high-level artificial intelligence, as well as something else. (It will begin telephoning him later and working on his non-psychiatric problems, becoming more and more his ally and less and less his therapist as time goes on.)

Tom now has an eye out for more of the stones, having learned that they are what has been causing his transformations, as he wishes to carry the process as far as it will go.

I don't consider Tom's mini-bios Gospel—if you'd feel more comfortable with different previous personalities/lives for Gurden, which might prove more useful later on or be easier to write about. I'd chosen one as a fanatic, one as a military man and one as a cleric to analogize the "warrior-priest" role of the Templars. While these elements are present, there is more to Tom Gurden than the sum of these parts—if only the music he'd long played and sung to.

I wanted the lives he seemed to recall to emerge slowly, as he finally becomes convinced that he is indeed the subject of assassination attempts and commences fleeing. As noted, he stays in touch with the comp-shrink via home computer and telephone at first—and later by means of more bizarre methods, as it begins calling him and finding other ways of reaching him (*e.g.*, TV, PA systems, a taxi's radio). Following his touching of the terminal, which commences the process of transmuting the machine into something rare and strange, it becomes progressively humane in its understanding, as well as somewhat witty, and develops the ability to utilize greater and greater sources of power—until finally it will tap into and blow the power supply for an entire sector of the country in setting up the final sequences.

(Digression, for a rationale for that power source: I had a conversation with a Los Alamos physicist doing fusion work a while back, and he told me that one model they'd worked out envisions fusion power plants the size of small cities. It would take about ten such to provide power for the whole country. From a strategical standpoint, though, anyone knocking out even one of these could kill a big piece of the nation's power supply. Spectacular. End digression.)

Gurden's various biographies emerge while he's on the run, not knowing that his girlfriend Sandy Vaele, formerly live-in, now separated but still very friendly, has been in the pay of his pursuers all along—an Assassin Watcher who'd been reporting back to them. She'd actually tested him for them at one point recently—which is what led to their being after him. (I'd thought of calling their front organization the Ismaili Liberation League, in that the Assassins had that much in common with the Ayatollah. On second thought, I junked this… Let's just make their front org a People's Popular Army, a Green Friday, a Red November, an Ultraviolet Catastrophe or somesuch.) The Assassins had her test him by exposing him to a piece of the Stone which had brought on a frightening memory overlay of something dark and magical, unlike any of the other experiences which had come via this route. In the flashback detailing this we see that she had had to engage him in some Tantric sex practices to bring him back down. Confirmed as the latest incarnation of Thomas Amnet of Normandy—Keeper of the Stone—he is thereby marked for the assassination attempts which follow. It also causes his breaking up with Sandy, as the only cover story she could think of to explain the experience was that she'd slipped him a designer drug, then took some herself, for what was supposed to be a fabulous experience in togetherness.

Sandy is about three times as old as she looks (that Elixir). We might have her ordered to do the hit on him herself after the others have failed because of his recalled Marine combat training—her having gotten together with him on the road—and either hesitating out of affection past and failing, or her trying it at the wrong moment—when the transmuted comp-shrink turns off the city and sends them back to the Horns of Hattin and beyond. Wait and see how her character develops, I'd say, and go whichever way seems more appropriate for her: bitch or somewhat sympathetic lady.

I'd thought of having Tom and Sandy caught up in a terrorist-hostage situation with Hasan himself in charge, as he'd finally decided to see things done right—involving the taking over of one of the fusion-cities, with a threat to shut it down—with Tom's memories of alchemistry and magic returning strongly about then. Tom then calls upon the powers of the Stone for help—some of which powers now reside in his own transmuted body, and some bizarre analog thereof within the comp-shrink—and the computer, which has been monitoring his progress, hears him over the terrorists' phone line or walkie-talkie as they are negotiating with authorities for the release of jailed compatriots and a fully fueled shuttle to take them to an Islamic satellite. It shuts down the fusion city itself, allowing for an attack by a SWAT team possessed of infra-red equipment, and it uses that power to send Tom and Hasan back to the time of the Horns of Hattin, a turning point in this history.

I can see a possibly amusing conversation between Hasan and Tom during the hostage situation, when Tom tells Hasan that he's been in the same damned terrorist bag for nine centuries, at which Hasan chuckles and replies that it was all very small potatoes—a hit here, a hit there—until the West taught the East how it really should be done, assembly-line style—"All that fellow Lawrence's fault." —I just recently read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (also, military historian Basil Liddel Hart's *Strategy*). Interesting, in that Hart claims that Winston Churchill was a great fan of Lawrence's, and that it was because of the Lawrence influence that Churchill decided to encourage partisan groups during WW II, impressed as he was with the Lawrence ideas of guerilla warfare and feeling it worth encouraging resistance movements because of what Lawrence had been able to do with the band of Arabs he'd trained. I thought this might make for an interesting, almost Shavian exchange. —Hart feels that there is a persistence of terrorist patterns, independent of political causes, once they've been introduced into an area. (I'll enclose copies of a couple of pages of his stuff in this area. See pp. 363–64 on this chronic quality.)

And so they meet again on the shores of the Sea of Galilee near Hattin. Their duel begins again—only this is a different, more sophisticated Thomas as well as an older and wiser Hasan. And again we might intercut to some of the same battle scenes we did before, see the same people die again… Only this time, Tom and Hasan talk as they fight, almost like two jaded chess players carrying on a conversation while attempting to slaughter each other on the board. Hasan asks Tom where the Stone really came from. Thomas tells him that the mundane story is that it was a meteorite possessed of unusual properties, while the esoteric story has it that it was stolen from Asgard by the god Loki (giving him a strangely Promethean role) and given to a group of tribal wise men ages ago, whence it inspired them to commence the long trail toward civilization, as its most potent effect is really to stimulate the evolution of the creative intellect (from Asgard to Kierkegaard? Sorry about that…), which resulted in Loki's banishment by the gods, condemnation as a demon, and general bad press thereafter. (The myth of Loki's final disposition—staked out in a cave with a snake spitting venom at his eyes, this being caught in a pan by his wife Hel, and his screaming whenever she empties the pan and it spits directly into them—seems similar in many respects to Prometheus's punishment.) This is why I wanted to mention the Viking-Norman connection early. Then Tom asks Hasan whence came the Elixir Vitae. Hasan explains that while he had inherited a partially successful formula from a predecessor along with a small supply of the real thing, the real drops are said to be the tears of the dark god Ahriman on first beholding Ahura Mazda's creation, the world in its pristine purity, before he set about to defile and destroy it.

They seem headed for a draw at about this point. Hasan, perhaps realizing this first, seeks to rattle Thomas by casting a stone at him and telling him that this is all that remains of Loki's damned gift. Hasan then proceeds to drain his vial of the Elixir, only a drop of which is normally needed for miraculous cures and life extensions. This fills him with a sense of the presence of Ahriman, just as that final bit of the Stone sees Thomas taken over by the Loki complex.

As they move to combat each other in these new guises, Thomas sees that this is but a part of the ancient dialogue between Orient and Occident and that the Stone itself represented something which has driven the race from the Paleolithic on, toward its unimagined, uncreated destiny—and then he feels the presence of Loki, not as demon but more as demiurge, agreeing in this. Then his own identity is submerged as the conflict of the gods begins in this never-never probability nexus of a valley. We could either fade here or write something very symbolic—such as a description of two old men playing *shahmat*, the predecessor of chess, till a king is toppled.

Then cut to Thomas playing piano in a very elegant and cosmopolitan lounge somewhere in the Near East, snatches of conversation re oil deals and air travel, as well as the ethnic mix, indicating that this is a different world than the one we started with, that terrorism is not the problem it was in the first, that the Ahriman factor is restrained here.

Depending on how Sandy's characterization had gone, we could either have her walk in here, memory somehow wiped, and take a fancy to the piano player, or she could be the peri in the next scene.

Cut to final, symbolic sequence, to cave where Ahriman is bound, an oriental snake—say, a cobra—spitting venom at his eyes. A lovely peri kneels beside him, catching the poison in a jeweled chalice. Whenever she moves to empty it, it catches him, and he screams…

<table>
<tr><th>Sura 1</th><th>Sura 2</th><th>Sura 3</th><th>Sura 4</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Guy de Lusignan crowned King of Jerusalem. Show Templars as rich & politically powerful; Hospitallers' irritation at coronation.</td><td rowspan="2">Regnald de Châtillon as a nasty but powerful individual. Ambitious, too. Perhaps a good guy to follow here for a "day in the life of" for general expository purposes—showing the Templars as arrogant and independent, closer, perhaps to the Assassins than to their fellows.</td><td>How the Templars operate (banking, etc.) Their relationship with Assassins.</td><td>Signs of sorcery among Templars and Assassins.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="3">Secret Garden & drugs.
Fanaticism on both sides—not to forget the use of bribery & intimidation by both.
Failure of compact between the Templars & Assassins (with Reginald as a go-between? Did he intentionally sabotage a deal?)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Imply secret membership in Templars
• Hint at Stone
• Amnet as shadowy figure here</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Norse mythos hints.</td></tr>
<tr><th>Fragment 1</th><th>Fragment 2</th><th>Fragment 3</th><th>Fragment 4</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Tom Gurden, troubled pianist, worried about assassination attempts.
Comp-shrink more interested in his case history than his problems.</td><td>Life 1:
French revolutionary</td><td>Life 2:
Preacher</td><td>Life 3:
Marine</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">• Watchers: Hints that these are protectors as well as destroyers.
• Thomas touches the terminal & the machine's transmutation commences.</td></tr>
</table>

The chart was created from a hand-drawn sheet found with the handwritten manuscript.

Sura 5	Sura 6	Sura 7	CODA
Build toward the Horns of Hattin. Let it be known that Hassan abides and rules Sheik Sinan. And Thomas Amnet Gerard de Rideford. All other conflicts to this point seem as subsidiary to Hasan's and Amnet's.	Commence battle at Hattin. Existence of Elixir and stone revealed to readers.	Hasan v. Amnet at Sea of Galilee. Intercuts to Horn of Hattin.	Hasan v. Amnet again. Sea of Galilee again. Intercut again (same or something different?) Conversation continues. Different ending (with snake and venom)
Fragment 5	**Fragment 6**	**Fragment 7**	
Running, meets Sandy (again?) Flashback: Sandy Vaete, sex & the Stone. Hints here that she may not be on the up & up.	Flight & pursuit. Capture & escape. Recapture. Sandy receives kill order on Tom.	Hostage situation in fusion city. The expository communication between Tom & Hasan begins. Transportation back to 12th century probability nexus.	
Computer changing, developing, helping			

The chart was created from a hand-drawn sheet found with the handwritten manuscript.

Notes

As detailed in "…And Call Me Roger," in Volume 4, in 1981 Zelazny worked for 20th Century Fox, writing three film treatments. One was an early version of the above, a tale involving the Knights Templar. Fox bought a different outline that he'd based on "He Who Shapes"/*The Dream Master,* and they developed it into the film *Dreamscape.* Zelazny lost on-screen credit because only his concept of a psychiatrist entering a patient's dreams remained in the movie.

Zelazny later revised the unsold Knights Templar outline and gave it to Jim Baen. Collaborator Thomas T. Thomas then developed that version into *The Mask of Loki.* The instructions are fairly detailed, and the result is one of Zelazny's most successful collaborations. Two years later, the two collaborated on *Flare,* for which Thomas wrote the outline (contained in the Zelazny archives at Syracuse University). Zelazny had much less involvement in *Flare*; he provided some editorial suggestions and wrote the poem "Hymn to the Sun," selected stanzas of which serve as chapter headings.

Several historical persons appear, but Thomas Ahmet / Tom Gurden is fictional, and Zelazny proposed the name before he knew that Thomas T[hurston] Thomas would collaborate on the novel.

Ahriman or Angra Mainyu is the principal spirit of darkness and evil, chief adversary to supreme deity **Ahura Mazda** in the Iranian religion Zoroastrianism. ***Shibumi*** is a 1979 spy novel by **Trevanian**. The **Assassins** were a Saracen fraternity of "Hashishim," "**hashishiyun**" or "hashish-takers" who defeated **The Knights Templar** at the battle of the Horns of Hattin in 1187. The Knights Templar, identified by their white mantle with red cross, existed for two centuries during the Middle Ages; they fell out of favor and disbanded after their defeat in the Crusades led to loss of the Holy Land. ***The Crusades*** is a 1964 history book by Henry Treece. **Hasan-as-Sabah** founded the Assassins. The ***Rubaiyat*** is a collection of poems by Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet **Omar Khayyam**. The **Medici** was a powerful family of skilled politicians, merchants, bankers and patrons of the arts who ruled Florence, Italy, during the Renaissance. ***The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*** was the 1927 work of historian Charles Homer Haskins. Jacob **Burckhardt** was a Swiss historian who "discovered" the Age of the Renaissance; his most notable work was the 1860 book *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy.*

Writer **Jack Lindsay** wrote the 1976 ***The Troubadors and Their World***, which contains poetry samples from the troubadors. ***The Piebald Standard*** is a 1959 history of the Knights Templar by **Edith Simon**. **Sheikh Sinan**, also known as the **Old Man of the Mountains**, was leader of the

Assassins, and **Gerard de Ridefort** was Grand Master of the Templars during the time of the Battle of Hattin. Zelazny imagines that Assassin founder Hasan-as-Sabah is still alive, and Zelazny applies the name Old Man of the Mountains to Hasan, not Sinan. **King Guy de Lusignan,** a French knight who became King-Consort of Jerusalem through marriage and the Templars' influence, led the kingdom to disaster at the Battle of Hattin. **Saladin** (Salah al-Din Yusuf Ibn Ayyub) recaptured Jerusalem for the Muslims after defeating King Guy at the Battle of Hattin. **Sir Steven Runciman**'s 3-volume ***History of the Crusades*** (1951–55) is one of the definitive history books for that era.

Raynald of Châtillon was a knight who served in the Second Crusade and remained in the Holy Land after its defeat. **PLO** is the Palestine Liberation Organization once led by Yasser Arafat; many consider it a terrorist group. **Dick Wellstood** was a jazz stride pianist. **The Philosopher's stone** is a mythical substance believed able to turn base metals into gold, an item (along with the Holy Grail) that the Knights Templar supposedly possessed. Transforming metals is alchemy or **alchemistry**. **Tantric sex** refers to the Hindu philosophy of Tantra or enlightenment, which includes spiritual and erotic rituals. **"All that fellow Lawrence's fault"** refers to Lawrence of Arabia, British soldier Thomas Edward Lawrence. He organized an Arab revolt against the Turks during World War I. His account of that campaign is ***Seven Pillars of Wisdom***. **Basil Liddel Hart** was a military historian whose best known work is the 1941 ***The Strategy of Indirect Approach***. Sir **Winston Churchill** was Prime Minister of England during the Second World War.

Shavian exchange refers to author George Bernard Shaw's style. Søren Aabye **Kierkegaard** was a Danish philosopher and theologian who wrote about the nature of faith, ethics, the Christian Church, the influence of religion on intellectual development, and the concept of the "leap of faith." **Asgard** is the realm of the gods in Norse mythology. **Loki** is the trickster god described in Zelazny's outline, staked out underneath a snake that tries to spit venom into his eyes. His wife **Hel** intercedes with a bowl that she must empty periodically. **Prometheus** is the Greek god who gave fire to man; Zeus chained him to Mount Caucasus and had an eagle peck out his liver every day. In certain religions, **Deimurge** created the material world and engendered evil. ***Shahmat*** ("checkmate"), predecessor of chess, developed in Persia.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Frontispiece portrait by Jack Gaughan first appeared on the cover of "Marcon VII Program and Schedule Book, 1972" where Roger Zelazny was Guest of Honor.

"Considering Cows" *by Melinda Snodgrass* first appears in this volume.

"The Two Rogers" *by George R. R. Martin* first appears in this volume.

"Permafrost" first appeared in *Omni*, April 1986.

"Itself Surprised" first appeared in *Omni*, August 1984.

"Mana from Heaven" first appeared in *Satellite Orbit, The Magazine of Satellite Entertainment and Electronics*, September and October 1983.

"Devil and the Dancer" first appeared in *Dilvish, the Damned*, Del Rey/Ballantine 1982.

"Garden of Blood" first appeared in *Sorcerer's Apprentice #3*, Summer 1979.

"Dilvish, the Damned" first appeared in *Dilvish, the Damned*, Del Rey/Ballantine 1982.

"LOKI 7281" first appeared in *R•A•M: Random Access Messages of the Computer Age*, ed. Thomas F. Monteleone, Hayden 1984.

"Dreadsong" first appeared in *The Planets*, ed. Byron Preiss, Bantam 1985.

"Dayblood" first appeared in *Twilight Zone*, June 1985.

"The Bands of Titan" first appeared in *The Bands of Titan / A Freas Sampler / A Dream of Passion*, Per Ardua Ad Astra 1986.

"Night Kings" first appeared in *Worlds of If*, September-November 1986.

"Quest's End" first appeared in *Omni*, June 1987.

"The Sleeper" first appeared in *Wild Cards*, ed. George R. R. Martin, Bantam 1987. Previously uncollected.

"Ashes to Ashes" first appeared in *Wild Cards 2: Aces High*, ed. George R. R. Martin, Bantam 1987. Previously uncollected.

"Deadboy Donner and the Filstone Cup" first appeared in *Terry's Universe*, ed. Beth Meacham, Tor 1988.

"Kalifriki of the Thread" first appeared in *Hidden Turnings*, ed. Diana Wynne Jones, Methuen 1989.

"The Deadliest Game" first appeared in *Drabble II: Double Century*, eds. Rob Meades and David B. Wake, Beccon Publications 1990.

"24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" first appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, July 1985.

"Constructing a Science Fiction Novel" first appeared in *The Writer*, October 1984.

"The Process of Composing" first appeared in *Science Fiction Source Book*, ed. David Wingrove, Van Nostrand 1984. Previously uncollected.

"Science Fiction Writing at Length" first appeared in *The Writer*, November 1991.

"Fantasy and Science Fiction: A Writer's View" first appeared in *Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. George E. Slusser & Eric S. Rabkin, Southern Illinois University Press 1987.

"Beyond the Idea" first appeared in *The Writer*, March 1988. Previously uncollected.

"'…And Call Me Roger': The Literary Life of Roger Zelazny, Part 5" by Christopher S. Kovacs, MD first appears in this volume.

"Head Count" first appears in this volume (written in the 1980s).

"*Changeling* (Film Outline)" first appears in this volume (written in the late 1970s).

"*Coils* (Outline)" first appears in this volume (written in the 1980s).

"Alien Speedway (Outline)" first appears in this volume (written in 1985).

"The Ahriman Factor (Outline)" first appears in this volume (written in 1981, revised in 1987).

Poems

"The De-Synonymization of Winter" first appeared in *Poems*, Discon II 1974. Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky* (as "The Inventor of Spring").

"Dreamscape," "555-1212," "Hands," "To Spin Is Miracle Cat," "Evangel," "Locker Room," and "Song" first appeared in *To Spin Is Miracle Cat*, Underwood-Miller 1981.

"Riptide" first appeared in *A Rhapsody in Amber* (as "Then, Again"), Cheap Street 1981.

"I, the Crooked Rose's Dream, Dumb-Sung Anatomie" first appeared in *Speculative Poetry Review #2*, 1977. Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky*.

"Song of the Ring" first appeared in *Niekas #10*, Dec 1964; previously uncollected.

"Day of Doom" first appeared in *Niekas #16*, June 1966; previously uncollected.

"Night of Fisting," "The Game's Thirteenth Strike," and "Nameless Grave by a Nameless Sea, Probably Greek" first appeared in *To Spin Is Miracle Cat*, Underwood-Miller 1981. Written 1955–60 for *Chisel in the Sky*.

"Appendix C" first appeared as multiple separate poems in the novel *Eye of Cat*, Timescape/Simon & Schuster 1982, and then collectively as "Appendix C" in *Hymn to the Sun: An Imitation*, DNA Publications 1996.

"Evil Chasing Prayer" first appeared as the prolog to *Eye of Cat*, Timescape/Simon & Schuster 1982 and then as part of "Appendix C" in *Hymn to the Sun: An Imitation*, DNA Publications 1996.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks go in many directions: to Roger Zelazny for his life's work, a body of writing that made this project a joy to work on; to my wife, Leah Anderson, without whose support this project would never have started; to Chris Kovacs, whose research efforts not only produced a comprehensive collection of material, but whose insights added depth to the whole project; to Ann Crimmins for her dedication to all things grammatical; to Kirby McCauley, who promoted the project and arranged for us the right to print Zelazny's writing; to Melinda Snodgrass and George R. R. Martin for their heartfelt introductions; to Michael Whelan for his spectacular dust jacket painting; and to Alice Lewis for her polished dust jacket design and her invaluable advice in design issues. A belated thanks to Jonathan Ostrowsky for digging up original documents to support a reference. Thanks also go to: Mark Olson for his help in book production, Geri Sullivan for design advice and our stalwart band of proofreaders:

> Rick Katze, Tim Szczesuil, Ann Broomhead, Larry Pfeffer,
> Peter Olson, Larry Setlow, Alice Lewis, Sharon Sbarsky,
> Ann Crimmins, Chris Kovacs, and Mark Olson.

David G. Grubbs
October, 2009

In order to write the "A Word from Zelazny" sections, the annotations, and the literary biography, I relied on many individuals. Some aided in the extensive search to locate original manuscripts, correspondence, rare fanzines, and obscure interviews. Colleagues, family, and friends of Roger Zelazny helped to clarify details and quash rumors about his life and work. My own colleagues helped with translations of Greek, German, Japanese and other foreign language phrases. Apologies to anyone who might have been overlooked in compiling the following list:

Charles Ardai, John Ayotte, George Beahm, Greg Bear, John Betancourt, Paul Bradford, Rick Bradford, Ned Brooks, Lois McMaster Bujold, John Callender, George Carayanniotis, Ung-il Chung, Michael Citrak, Giovanna Clairval, Bob Collins, Lloyd Currey, Jack Dann, Chris DeVito, Jane Frank, c Shell Franklin, Paul Gilster, Dave Goldman, Simon Gosden, Ed Greenwood, Joe Haldeman, David Hartwell, Gerald Hausman, Graham Holroyd, Patrick Hulman, Tom Jackson, Beate Lanske, Elizabeth LaVelle, Jane Lindskold, George R. R. Martin, Bryan McKinney, Henry Morrison, Kari Mozena, Rias Nuninga, Richard Patt, Greg Pickersgill, Bob Pylant, Mike Resnick, Andy Richards, Fred Saberhagen, Roger Schlobin, Dean Schram, Darrell Schweitzer, Robert Silverberg, Dan Simmons, Dean Wesley Smith, Ken St. Andre, Richard Stegall, Thomas T. Thomas, Norris Thomlinson, Josh Wanisko, Erick Wujcik, Carl Yoke, Trent Zelazny, Cindy Ziesing, and Scott Zrubek.

Diane Cooter, Nicolette Schneider, Lara Chmela
Roger Zelazny Papers, Special Collections
Research Center, Syracuse University Library

Thomas Beck, Susan Graham, Marcia Peri, Shaun Lusby
Azriel Rosenfeld Science Fiction Research Collection,
University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Sara Stille, Eric Milenkiewicz, Audrey Pearson
Bruce Pelz and Terry Carr Fanzine Collections, Special
Collections Library, University of California, Riverside

Greg Prickman, Jacque Roethler, Kathryn Hodson, Jeremy Brett
M. Horvat Collection, Special Collections,
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Jill Tatem
University Archives, Case Western Reserve University

Thomas M. Whitehead
Whitehead Collection, Special Collections Department, Temple University Libraries

Patti Thistle, Dion Fowlow, George Beckett
Document Delivery Office, Health Sciences Library,
Memorial University of Newfoundland.

And then there are the personal thanks that I need to make. Of course none of this would have been possible without Roger Zelazny creating the very stories and characters that I find myself returning to again and again. When I finally met him at Ad Astra in 1986, I interrupted his rapid departure from the convention and asked "Mr. Zelazny" to sign the books I'd carried with me. He kindly took care of that and the requests of my companions. "Everybody OK, then? Right, gotta get to the airport"—and then his parting comment to me was "…and call me Roger." From that memory came the fitting title for the monograph in these volumes.

My mother handed me that paperback *Nine Princes in Amber* one dull day so long ago when I complained that I had nothing to read, and my parents drove me to countless new and used bookstores on the very first Zelazny quest to find copies of all of his books. The Internet makes searches so much easier now, and I couldn't have gathered much of this material if I'd had to rely on physical searches and postal mail. My buddy Ed Hew and his cousins drove me to Ad Astra for that fateful meeting. Dave Grubbs believed in and fought to see this project succeed when my involvement made it expand well beyond what he'd anticipated, and Ann Crimmins pruned, weeded, and used a flamethrower where necessary to turn my sometimes passive prose into something more readable. And none of this would have been possible without the support of my wife, Susan, and our children Caileigh and Jamieson, who put up with my additional absences from home and the other blocks of time consumed in creating this project. If their eyes should roll at mention of the name Zelazny, you may now understand why. And the fact that Susan's birthday is also May 13, or that my last name also refers to what happens in a smithy, are just examples of those Strange and Odd Coincidences in Life realized while researching this project. That one of our beloved Golden Retrievers was named Amber is *not* one of those coincidences.

Christopher S. Kovacs, MD
October, 2009 (Updated December, 2015)

I wish to thank my daughters Fiona and Deirdre, whom I dragged to cons as children and who have grown to love sf and fantasy as much as I do. Particular thanks to my husband Peter Havriluk for patience, encouragement, and easing the log jam at the p.c. by buying himself a laptop. Thanks to Elizabeth Zaborskis Fernandez, for help with the Spanish. Dave and Chris, I'm delighted to have worked with you. Thanks also to the various Crimmins/Havriluk cats who warmed my lap as I edited.

Ann Crimmins
October, 2009

TECHNICAL NOTES

This book is set in Adobe Garamond Pro, except for the titles (which are set in Trajan Pro), using Adobe InDesign 6. The book was printed and bound by Sheridan Books of Ann Arbor, Michigan, on acid-free paper.

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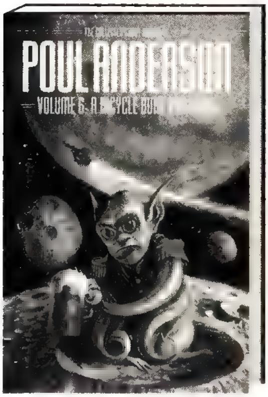

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ROGER ZELAZNY (1937–1995) reaffirmed his mastery of short fiction during the 1980s with his release of a pair of Hugo-winning stories, his completion of the Dilvish series, and his creation of Croyd Crenson for the Wild Cards shared world.

During the interval covered by this volume, Zelazny began the second five-book series in the Chronicles of Amber, starting with *Trumps of Doom*. He continued his serious study of martial arts and he created a shared world of his own. He also wrote collaborative novels with Fred Saberhagen, Thomas T. Thomas, and Gerald Hausman.

Zelazny is best known for his novellas such as "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," "He Who Shapes," "Home Is the Hangman," and "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" and for novels, including *Lord of Light*, *This Immortal*, *Jack of Shadows*, and the 10-volume Amber series started by *Nine Princes in Amber*. He garnered six Hugo Awards for novels and short fiction and three Nebulas for short fiction.

PHOTOGRAPH © MICHAEL WHELAN

MICHAEL WHELAN is one of the world's premier science fiction and fantasy artists. His spectacular work has covered more than 350 books and more recently graces the halls of fine art galleries. With these volumes, he has finally fulfilled Zelazny's longstanding wish for a genuine Michael Whelan cover.

After a brief stint as a medical illustrator, Whelan turned to fantastic art and burst onto the SF scene at the 1974 World Science Fiction Convention. Since then, his illustrations have adorned many Stephen King novels, most of Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders of Pern series, Michael Moorcock's Elric series, many other best sellers, and several record albums.

Whelan has won scores of awards, including 15 Hugo Awards (13 for Best Professional Artist). He received his first Hugo in Boston at the 1980 Worldcon, Noreascon 2, and since then, he has won 26 Locus Awards (25 for Best Professional Artist).

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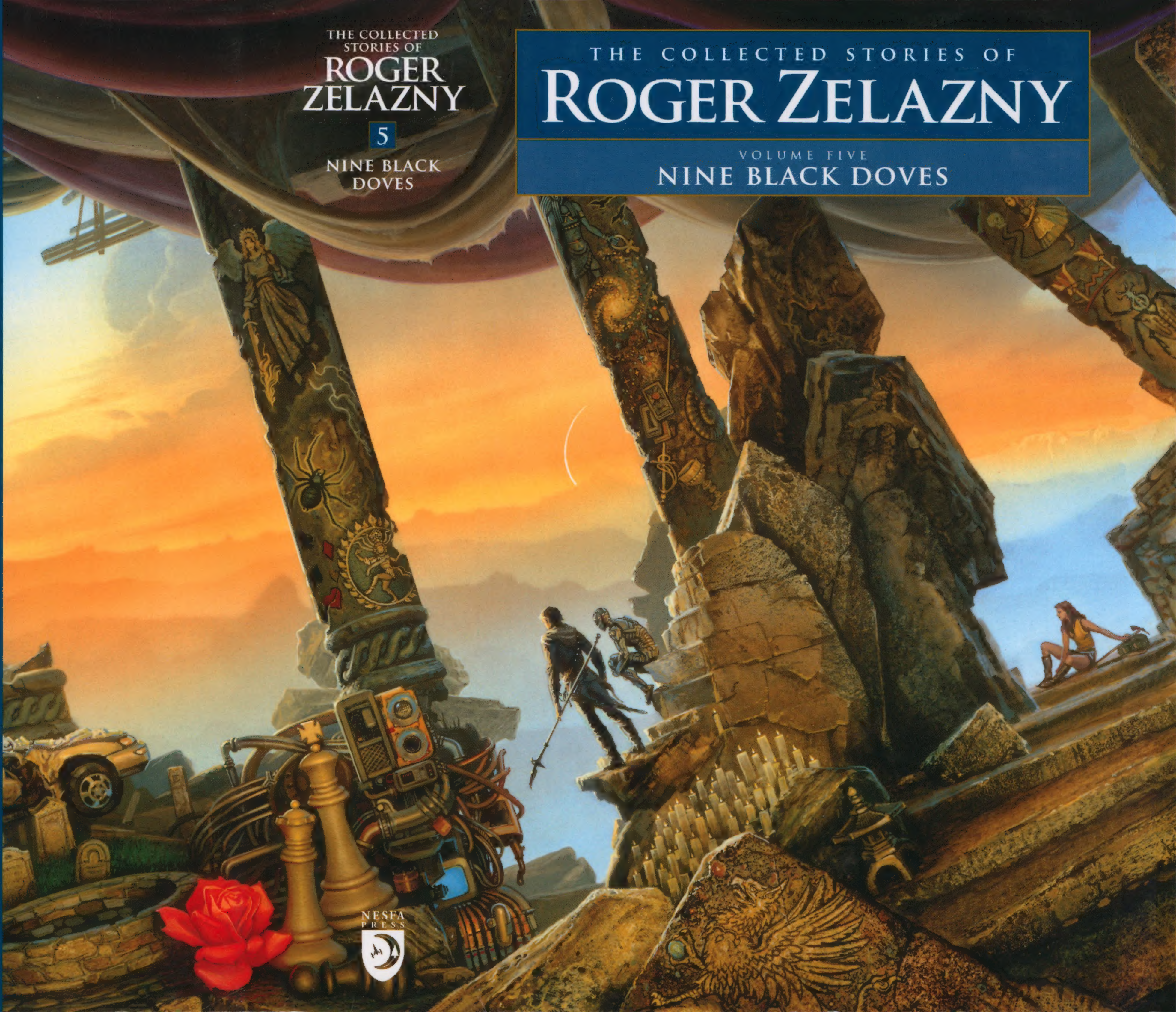

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